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SOCIOSEMIOTICS OF THE MEXICAN NARCOCULTURE:
Between subcultures, mass culture, and the semiosphere.

Master Thesis

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I have written the Master Thesis myself, independently. All of the other authors' texts, main viewpoints and all data from other resources have been referred to.

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INTRODUCTION

Reasons for the analysis

Drug trafficking has gained an alarming presence in Mexico over the last couple of decades. The growing manifestation of this phenomenon is evidenced by the rising number of violent confrontations and the overwhelming recurrence of the topic in the country's (and the international) mass media. The phenomenon presents social, political, and economic consequences that require further attention from the disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences.

Some of the many sources generating meanings around the topic are the cultural expressions of films, songs, soap operas, novels, architectural styles, and religious cults, grouped under the term of *narcoculture*¹. These expressions depict and exemplify, aspects related to the drug traffic of the region with an emphasis on the drug dealers' *lifestyle*². By approaching narcoculture from the view point of sociosemiotics³, this thesis seeks to question the possibilities of the term *narcoculture*, and to analyze the consequences that follow from framing the topic as a subcultural form or as a theme offered by the entertainment industry.

As with most of the quires inside the academic research, this work can be traced back to the personal concerns of its author. Living outside one's own country allows us to observe and question the phenomena that was previously surrounding us with a new—literal and metaphorical—distance. For this particular case, it was the frequent number of rather alarming news related to the drug traffic, seen from abroad, what

¹ There are other activities sometimes included as part of the term, however when using the term narcoculture this work will focus on the ones listed above. More about the excluded expressions can be found in Chapter 1 of this work.

² *Lifestyle* is understood in Anthony Giddens' terms, not only as group of consumeristic practices but also as a set of activities fulfilling a "particular narrative of self-identity" (Giddens 1991:181).

³ The work stresses the social aspects (or the pragmatics) in the generation of meaning, discourse, and points of reference.

brought attention to the topic. By questioning the possible meanings and the constitution of that reality, this thesis seeks to raise further possibilities for the topic inside the academic research.

Topic definition

The aim of the work is to analyze how the Mexican ‘narcoculture’ can be approached as a semiotic space wherein the dialogue between subcultural forms and mass culture takes place. The research questions are:

1. How can the chosen expressions of narcoculture be related to the concept of subculture?
2. How can we trace the insertion of the *expressions of narcoculture* inside the mass culture?
3. How can the concept of *semiosphere* help to understand the interaction between subcultures and mass culture for the case of narcoculture?

And furthermore,

- a. How can this interaction be analyzed within the particular expressions of narcoculture?

This thesis makes the argument that the cultural expressions inside Mexico’s narcoculture are not simply a group of commercial activities depicting the drug dealers, or a delimited subcultural expression. Rather, the result of a dialogue between both, and that this dialogue can be more easily understood with the concept of *semiosphere*. Furthermore, it is posited that narcoculture’s discursive contents help to produce and reproduce a series of representations about the drug dealers and the drug lords’⁴ lifestyles by offering abundant descriptions of them (fictional or not), and by labelling with the word *narco* the diverse activities where the drug dealers are believed to have an active participation.

The work is particularly focused on the application of the theories of *mass culture*, *subculture*, and *semiosphere* to the study of Mexican narcoculture –a

⁴ The main difference between the drug dealers and the drug lords is the size of their operations, the term *drug dealer* could be used in a more generic way to refer to both, while the drug lord is usually the one controlling larger operations even an entire *cartel*. The representations presented in narcoculture have an emphasis on the drug lords, or the enriched drug dealers, though they also refer to the *drug dealers* as a generality.

discourse among others portraying the situation of the region – in particular offering a closer look at the *narcocorridos* (song-ballads of the drug traffic thematic) by applying the mentioned terms to this particular expression, thereby presenting vast resources for the empirical analysis.

Historiography

Studies of narcoculture have been relatively widespread in the academic sphere, starting with Colombia (Nasser 2008; Rincón 2013; Rueda Fajardo 2009; Wilches Tinjacá 2014), the place where the term was coined (Haidar, Chávez Herrera 2014: 1), and a country whose drug traffic representations have been widespread and enduring (Nasser 2008:4). There, as well as in the rest of the Americas, like Venezuela (Sánchez Peláez 1974), many studies have been carried out on the subject.

Studies dedicated particularly to the *Mexican narcoculture* form a big part of this pool of research. They can be broadly divided in two, those that study the topic as a whole (Astorga 2004; Campbell 2007, 2009; Cerbino, Macaroff 2011; Haidar, Chávez Herrera 2014; López Levi, Díaz Figueroa 2013; Sánchez Godoy 2009) and those that put their emphasis in one of the expressions. The ones dedicated to the *narcocorridos* (songs) (Astorga 1997; Figueroa Cofré 2007; Karam Cárdenas 2013; Meléndrez 2011; Oliver 2012; Ramírez-Pimienta 2011); to the *narco* soap operas (Benavides 2008; Rincón 2013); to the religious practices (Kail 2005; Oliver 2012; Pérez-Rayón Elizundia 2006), or to the stylistic choices in architecture (Sáinz 2012).

The classification of this vast literature can be even more meticulous, if we take more specific frames. For example the work of the anthropologist Howard Campbell (2007, 2009, 2014) —a scholar at the University of Texas at El Paso who is dedicated to the study of this phenomenon in the region of El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juárez — has been previously focused on the study of ethnographic stories related to the drug traffic of the bordering region (Campbell 2007) and to the analysis of *narco-propaganda*, which he defines as: “orchestrated acts of violence, videos, graffiti, signs

and banners, blogs, narcocorridos, and control of the mass media” (Campbell 2014:1) as employed by the *drug cartels*⁵.

The specificity of these studies allows yet another classification, related to the disciplines and approaches that are being used to study this phenomenon. This classification usually vary from an array of sociology, anthropology, history, economics, and more recently semiotics. This last one has mainly been used to frame specific aspects of larger research pieces within other disciplines. For example, López Levi and Díaz Figueroa (2013) study the work of Mexican artists dealing with drug traffic and its violence, using the theories of Algirdas J. Greimas for the analysis of visual art (López Levi, Díaz Figueroa 2013:169). A similar example is the work of Karam Cárdenas (2013), who studies the narcocorridos and their evolution, implementing a semiotic analysis of the lyrics with reference to the works of Ronald Barthes, Roman Jakobson and Umberto Eco. Yet another example is again Howard Campbell, who in his book *Drug War Zone* (2009) uses the term “narco-semiotics” as the headline for a section devoted to the messages or signs that are written on banners, blogs or on cardboard left by drug dealers next to mutilated or tortured bodies of their victims (Campbell 2009:28). These messages, says Campbell, are “written in underworld drug slang (peppered with execrable spelling, bad grammar, and crude obscenities) with semi-secret references to and threats against drug lords and other cartel members” (Ibid. 28–29). According to Campbell (Ibid. 29): “The style of drug killings forms a semiotic system of ‘inscribed’ bodies subject to endless interpretation by cartel members.”

Finally, a more primarily semiotic-focused research was proposed in the 12th World Congress of Semiotics in Bulgaria, November 2014. Haidar and Chávez Herrera (2014) gave a presentation on the use of cultural semiotics and complexity theory for the study of narcoculture, proposing that the terms *anticulture* or *non-culture* should be used instead (Haidar, Chávez Herrera 2014:1). This work however has not yet been published and can only be accessed through its manuscript for the conference.

⁵Name given to the criminal organizations that are in control of illegal drug trade at large scales. In Mexico, for the year of 2013, at least nine major organizations or *cartels* could be listed according to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in the United States (Beitel 2013)

The objective of this study, compared to the previous ones, will be that of applying semiotics to the *social construction of reality* (Berger and Luckmann 1966), with that *reality* being the Mexican drug traffic and the drug dealers. Put in another way, it aims to apply semiotic analysis to the social construction of meanings around the drug dealers. One common feature of the previous studies is that they tend to present a divided understanding of narcoculture as *either* a cultural narrative related to self-identity *or* a propagandistic and commercial activity. In either case, the diverse expressions named under narcoculture seemed to be trapped in the dichotomy: as forms used by drug lords to promote and justify their criminal actions (Campbell 2014; Oliver 2012; Sánchez Godoy 2009; Simonett, Herrera-Sobek 2004), or as expressions of self-identity and criminal *counter-culture*⁶ (Astorga 1997, 2004; Campbell 2007; López Levi, Díaz Figueroa 2013; Ramírez-Pimienta 2011). Moreover, the expressions can be reduced to be filling up a gap in the market, portraying and depicting in an amusing way the drug traffic of the (Simonett, Herrera-Sobek 2004).

Regarding this point, the present thesis seeks to question this separation. First, by contrasting them and pointing out the differences; and second, by bringing the approaches back together as a discourse that regenerates and maintains representations about *who the drug dealers are* in the context of the drug traffic of Mexico. The utility and the importance of studying narcoculture as a holistic or fluid cultural discourse is that it helps to further question what the representations of the drug traffic mean, and how they influence other spheres (*e.g.* political or economic).

The structure of this text

The work is structured as it follows. **Chapter 1** offers an introduction to the topic and is divided into two subchapters: the first subchapter (*Concepts in this work*) clarifies and delimits some of the concepts used to map the research; the second (*The context and content of narcoculture*) expands on specific expressions of narcoculture and the general context of the phenomenon. The concepts delimited in the first part

⁶The reason for using the term *subculture* instead of *counter-culture* in this work, is due to the way the chosen expressions of narcoculture are embedded in the broader Mexican culture, which calls into question their actual opposition or *self-critique* (Eco 1994:124). More on this debate can be found in the Chapter 1 of this work.

are *sociosemiotics*; *culture*, *counter-culture* and *anticulture* based in Umberto Eco's (1994) analysis; and the delimitation of the *narcoculture's expressions* considered for this work. The second subchapter offers an introduction to the term *narcoculture* in its Mexican context, and gives either a brief example or a description of the previously listed expressions: the *narcocorridos*, the cult to Jesús Malverde as an example of a *narco-saint*, 'Jardines del Humaya' as an example of *narco-architecture*, 'La Reina del Sur' as an example of *narco-literature*, and a brief mention of the *narco-drama* genre in films and soap operas.

Chapter 2 presents the *theoretical frame* and its visual representations or *models*. The concepts and the theories used to seize the phenomenon there are *subcultures*, *mass culture*, and *semiosphere*. Each one of these concepts will have a subchapter of their own, with a delimitation of the concept, their theories and their applicability to narcoculture as a whole, and a visual representation of the presented concepts applied to the phenomenon. The subchapter dedicated to *subculture* (*Narcoculture as a subculture?*), takes first the works of Ken Gelder (2007), and Alan Fine and Sherryl Kleinman (1979), to delimit the term subculture, then applies Dick Hebdige's (2007) *spectacular subculture* to narcoculture. The subchapter *Narcoculture in mass culture*, focuses on narcoculture's insertion in the market. This subchapter refers to Mark Gottdiener's (1985) semiotic analysis of mass culture, and to the *transmedial worlds* of Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca (2004). The last subchapter *Narcoculture in the semiosphere*, takes the concept of the *semiotic space* as defined by Yuri Lotman (2009) and applies it to both previous concepts—subculture and mass culture, in the frame of narcoculture. The aim of this last subchapter is to include the other two elements in a continuous dialogue and in interaction with the elements of territory, memory and identity.

Chapter 3 is the last chapter and it is dedicated to the empirical analysis of the narcocorridos. This chapter draws on the elements of *spectacular subculture*, *mass culture*, *semiosphere*, *identity* and *memory* to seize the songs. The chapter is composed of five subchapters dedicated to describe the context of the narcocorridos; their production and consumption patterns; their relationship to other forms such as the news and their incidence in the formation of cultural identities. The aim of the chapter is to show how the previously discussed concepts, particularly the implementation of the semiotic space, are pertinent to better understand the meanings

generated by these songs. This chapter also concludes with a visual representation of the narcocorridos' semiotic space.

The **Conclusions** section is divided in three: an *Overview* that presents the general results of the proceedings of the thesis; the *Key answers*, which expands on the main conclusions; and the *Further perspectives*, a part that presents the new challenges and questions that emerged from the research process. The **Annexes** include pictures of the cemetery 'Jardines del Humaya' and the complete transcripts of the three songs that were used in **Chapter 3**, accompanied by their full English translation.

1. NARCO CULTURE AND THE CONCEPTS OF THIS WORK

1.1 Concepts in this work

This segment expands on some⁷ of the terminology used for the mapping of the research object. *Sociosemiotics*, the distinctions between *counter-culture*, *subculture*, and *anticulture* are defined and discussed, as well as the specificity of the *narcoculture expressions* used throughout the length of the work to seize the phenomenon. The definitions of culture and the concepts derived from it are countless. Therefore, whilst each of the definitions and concepts cannot be examined in detail here; what can be offered is a general understanding of the concepts and their relevance to the present work. A brief first description of them will open the floor for the consequent description of some of narcoculture's contents.

1.1.1 Sociosemiotics

Adding the prefix *socio-* to semiotics could seem redundant at first sight if we follow the famous sign triad (sign-object-interpretant) of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) whereby the *interpretant* tacitly includes the *social* aspect of semiosis. This is because all signs (and all of semiosis) were seen by Peirce to include the relationship to the context, and therefore to the interpreter already. However as Charles W. Morris (1938) would later mention, the study of the signs can be divided and focused on just one of the sign-relations. He names the studies of these particular relations as *syntactics*, *semantics* and *pragmatics*, where pragmatics is focused on the relationship between the signs and its interpreters (Morris 1938:6). This is where, as Randviir and Copley (2010) have agreed, some of sociosemiotics' first heritage can be found (Randviir, Copley 2010:129). Sociosemiotics, as used in this research responds

⁷ The main concepts of *subculture*, *mass culture* and *semiosphere* will be later defined in the theoretical part of the work, Chapter 2.

to the emphasis the work has on the relationship between the signs portraying the drug dealers (as expressed in narcoculture) and their social meanings.

1.1.2 Culture, counter-culture and *anticulture*

Umberto Eco (1994) wrote an in-depth and concise analysis about the interaction of the concepts of *culture* and *counter-culture*, which is rather useful to explain those same terms in the frame of this analysis. Eco first gives three possible definitions for the term culture, where the third definition, called the *anthropological definition* is the closest to the one used here. Eco (Ibid.119) writes that: “It comprises the complex of institutions, myths, rites, laws, beliefs, codified everyday behavior, value systems and material techniques elaborated by a group of humans”. He would later criticize this concept because of its ethnocentricity, its lack of self-critique, and its apparent neutrality, which makes *culture* seem all encompassing, and a place with no real room for counter-cultures, where the outside is described as *barbaric* or *non-culture* (Ibid.121). The term culture, he says, is covered by prejudices that do not let the difference be part of *culture*: “our cultural world has not yet shaken itself free of the taboos with which idealist philosophy saddled the word ‘culture’” (Ibid.122). Because of this he proposes a fourth critical definition of the term, which takes all the points of the *anthropological definition* but adds the significant *self-criticism* that allows the culture to grow and change by acknowledging the possibility of counter-cultures (Ibid.124). This fourth definition of culture is in itself a form of *counter-culture*.

“This fourth sense of ‘culture’ is always, and in a positive sense, a ‘counter-culture. Counter-culture is thus the active critique or transformation of the existing social, scientific or aesthetic paradigm. [...] It is the only cultural manifestation that a dominant culture is unable to acknowledge and accept. [...] Counter-culture comes about when those who transform the culture in which they live become critically conscious of what they are doing and elaborate a theory of their deviation from the dominant model, *offering a model that is capable of sustaining itself*.” (Ibid. 124)

If we follow Eco’s definitions, the definition of *Mexican narcoculture* in this work (and in all the works listed in the historiography) could hardly be taken in its totality as a

self-critical sustainable culture, which recognizes itself and aims for an active transformation of paradigms. Narcoculture here is closer to what Eco defines as a *parasitic or dependent culture* (Eco 1994:122) because it is deeply embedded in the dominant culture and depends on it to exist. Part of the reason for using the term *subculture* instead is owed to the way the term *parasitic culture* has been used before in previous works (Haidar, Chávez Herrera 2014:1), as closer in meaning (or even as equivalent) to *barbaric* and *non-culture*. A fact that carries further down the set of negative connotations the term culture has as described by Eco.

1.1.3 Narcoculture's expressions

The term *narcoculture* itself will be explained more broadly in the following section. This part is mainly devoted to clarifying which expressions of narcoculture are considered for this work, and why such selections were made. In the first instance the term narcoculture can be taken to designate a vast number of activities, which may or may not include the direct participation of the drug dealers in them. This work is broadly centered on those activities that describe or portray, in one way or another, the drug dealers and their everyday life: their beliefs, values, attitudes, clothes, language, aesthetics, and their illegal activities (this lasts ones in a general and colloquial way). These activities are the songs, movies, soap operas and novels of narcoculture. In the second instance, narcoculture can be taken to mean those activities where drug dealers actively participate and that are labeled as *narco* but are not forms of verbal or physical violence perpetuated in the name of their cartels. This second group might be more difficult to delimit but in this work it is reduced to the religious practices or cults⁸ in which drug dealers take part; to the songs they or their families request and pay for to describe their prowess; and to the way they design their houses and graveyards. The general stylistic choices of behavior, slang words and other consumeristic practices of the drug dealers that are not listed here but that can also be seen as forming part of

⁸ The word *cult* should not to be taken in its pejorative sense but as a religious practice that includes rituals and ceremonies; for this particular case devoted to the Holy Death and to Jesús Malverde, these two characters have their own congregations and their worship resembles the one of the Saints or the *Patronos* of the Catholic Church however none of them has been recognized as legitimate by this last one.

their lifestyle will be mentioned in specific examples when necessary, since they are not a clearly delimited group.

The other expressions that can also be listed as part of narcoculture and that are wielded by the drug dealers such as blogs, banners, orchestrated acts of violence, control over the mass media, and online videos (Campbell 2014:1) will not be taken in consideration for this analysis simply because they work as direct acts of violence that form part of the constant duel between the cartels and the authorities, thereby leading to another broad sphere of queries this brief study cannot take on.

Consequently, the term *narcoculture* as used here is the set of cultural expressions used to depict and construct a broad narrative of the drug dealers' lifestyle: songs (*narcocorridos*), films (*narco-movies*), novels (*narco-novels* or *narco-literature*), cults (to the Holy Death or Jesús Malverde), soap operas, and architectural design (*narco-architecture*).

1.2 The context and content of narcoculture

According to Haidar and Chávez Herrera (2014: 1), the term was coined in Colombia in 1995 by the writer and mayor of Tula, Gustavo Álvarez Gardeázabal. For the specific context of Mexico, according to Jorge Alan Sánchez Godoy (2009):

“The Sinaloa narcoculture, like others originated in different regions of the country, has –with some variants- a particular symbolic universe. A system of values, just like that of the Mediterranean mobs, based on the premise of honor, courage, family loyalty and group protection, revenge, generosity, hospitality, nobility, and prestige;” (Sánchez Godoy 2009:80)⁹

Sánchez Godoy based his analysis on the state of Sinaloa, but there is no further differentiation found in the consulted literature between *Mexican narcoculture* and the narcoculture of particular regions of Mexico. According to this author, narcoculture for this specific state cannot be considered a subculture because its forms are already *institutionalized* and deeply embedded in the everyday life of the state (Sánchez Godoy

⁹ All the quoted references from articles or newspapers in Spanish were translated from the originals by the author of this work.

2009:82). Such differentiation however, is not based on the *type* of narcoculture present in the region but in the strong presence of the cartels in that state. Nevertheless from now on, not to fall in terminological deadlocks, no further differentiation between the narcoculture of this region and the narcoculture of Mexico will be made¹⁰.

The state of Sinaloa —northern Mexican state infamous for years of violent confrontations between the drug cartels— is a place consistently mentioned by the narcocorridos, in the history of the religious cults, the novels, and the movies with the drug traffic thematic of Mexico. This fact further corroborates the assertion made by Sánchez Godoy that the narcoculture of Mexico has its roots in that state (Sánchez Godoy 2009:79). In his work, Sánchez Godoy (2009) also describes the course of the culture of the drug traffic from the rural to the urban context. Sánchez Godoy suggests that the cartels used to have specific codes and norms when they were located in the small rural areas, and that once they moved to the cities and the phenomenon spread, they changed, lost their subcultural forms, and narcoculture became a new mass-culture; aimed primarily at legitimizing the drug dealers in larger contexts (Ibid.92). This is an important aspect for this work because the analysis of narcoculture will be in part an answer to the movement from the subcultural sphere to the mass-cultural one. This dichotomy (subculture/mass-culture) already can be seen in the previously listed expressions, some of them are dedicated to describe (and many times praise) the lifestyle of the drug dealers (whilst reaching massive audiences); while others are activities carried out by some drug dealers (imposed almost uniquely as their own). These are the ones closer to being considered subcultural. One of the only expressions presenting both elements (at least more openly) description and participation, is the narcocorrido and this is the reason for focusing the further empirical analysis (Chapter 3) on these songs. Brief descriptions or examples of the narcoculture expressions we have previously listed are presented below and except for the songs, they cannot have a further analysis in the length of this work.

¹⁰The omission of this differentiation in the name of the term does not mean that the Mexican narcoculture has the same presence in the different places, even more as it will be later noticed there is a prominent presence of Mexican narcoculture in the United States which can accompanied by different referents like the immigrant culture present in that country.

1.2.1 Narcocorridos

These are songs that tend to expose and idealize the lifestyle of the drug lords in their lyrics. They can be seen as sympathetic and colloquial representations of the outlaws and the events of the drug traffic between Mexico and the United States. The background scenario of their stories is the “Drug War” between the drug cartels and the authorities. Their main characters are: the drug lords, the police, the army, the Mexican and the US Governments; but also the guns, the money, the drugs, and the cars of the drug lords, all of which are shown as symbols of status and pride.

1.2.2 Cults associated with narcoculture: The cult to Jesús Malverde.

Jesús Malverde colloquially known as “the saint of the drug dealers” is related to the religious practices of narcoculture. The cult to Malverde is similar in its story to what Eric Hobsbawn (1981:17) calls the *social bandit*¹¹ or the myth of Robin Hood. The story behind Jesús Malverde is difficult to trace and there is no evidence proving he ever lived; most of the details around his life are based on oral history and popular legends (Oliver 2012:92). He is said to have lived in Mexico under the name of Jesús Juárez Mazo during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910). Throughout his lifetime, it is said (Ibid.91) that he was an outlaw stealing from the rich to give to the poor, that he was killed in the year of 1909, and that his body was hanged from a tree as a warning to others trying to follow his steps. As with the story of other saints there is not much information about when exactly people started to ask him for favors or when he started to answer their prayers. The cult to Jesús Malverde was not initially attached to narcoculture, however it has become a symbol of this and, together with the cult to the Holy Death¹², he is considered part of the religious ideology followed by drug dealers. Evidence for this is provided by the four chapels erected for him by drug

¹¹ Hobsbawn describes them as “[...] peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, [...] in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported” (Hobsbawn 1981:17) The *social bandit*, as we will see later on, applies not only for Jesús Malverde but generally to the way the drug lords are portrayed by narcoculture.

¹² The work has chosen to describe just the cult to Jesús Malverde because the cult to the Holy Death is also known for being followed by criminals and outlaws, but not specifically by drug dealers.

dealers in Mexico, Colombia, and the United States (Oliver, 2012:92), the sheer number of his followers, and his presence in the lyrics of numerous narcocorridos.

1.2.3 Narco-architecture. *Jardines del Humaya*

‘Jardines del Humaya’ is a cemetery located in the outskirts of Culiacan, Sinaloa and it contains several examples of what is called *narco-architecture*, a kitsch styled applied to houses or mausoleums characterized by its extravagance and ostentation (Sáinz 2012:43). ‘Jardines del Humaya’ has a peculiar landscape that denotes the situation of the drug traffic of the country in its more recent years. The cemetery shows enormous and luxurious mausoleums dedicated to the drug lords. Mausoleums that are intended to mirror the power and the status of the people buried in them with the use of grand edifications made in the honor of the deceased (Oliver 2012:96). One of the peculiar characteristics of this landscape is the extreme luxuries that can be found inside the mausoleums, which are sometimes three floors high and can include: solar panels, bullet proof windows, marble floors, air conditioning, plasma TV sets, and gold inlays on the walls (Ibid.95), not to mention the high prices that have to be paid per square meter to own a place in the cemetery. The cemetery demonstrates a system of values based on prestige and status which is common to the drug mob, as noted by Sanchez Godoy (2009:80). Furthermore it presents how influential and widespread the delinquency related to drug traffic is in the region, with the constant expansion of the cemetery and the abundant number of this type of mausoleum¹³.

1.2.4 Narco-literature. *La Reina del Sur*

The amount of literature written about Mexico’s drug traffic is vast (Haidar, Chávez Herrera 2014:8). Just one example of this activity is the fictional novel *La Reina del Sur*¹⁴ (2002) written by the Spaniard Arturo Pérez-Reverte. The book tells the story of Teresa Mendoza, a Mexican woman that becomes the leader of a main mob gang in Spain after she managed to run away from the Mexican cartels. The novel was

¹³ A picture of an ordinary cemetery in Mexico followed by a picture of ‘Jardines del Humaya’ can be found in the annexes of this work.

¹⁴ Benavides (2008:152), dedicates a chapter of his book to the analysis of this book, which was later adapted as a soap opera.

originally inspired by the lyrics of a narcocorrido: *Contrabando y traición* (Smuggling and treason), by Los Tigres del Norte (Ramírez-Pimienta 2011:105), and it served as the foundation for subsequent soap operas, a movie, and more narcocorridos.

1.2.5 Narco soap operas and narco films

Once again the amount of examples is very wide especially when the production of all of the Americas is considered. According to Haidar and Chávez Herrera (2014:7Ha), soap operas containing a drug traffic theme were popularized first in Colombia, and in Mexico they reached their peak of popularity with the adaptation of the book *La Reina del Sur* (2002). An extensive analysis of this genre and of the general narco-drama in films is offered by Oswald Hugo Benavides (2008):

“The films portray narcos (drug dealers) as ambivalent subjects who, although involved in the illegal drug trade, maintain strong social and personal commitments to their local communities, family members, and friends. At the same time, these films contain a high level of regional specificity and interaction. As they are a regional expression of Mexico’s northern frontier, they represent the broader picture of the migrant condition as well as that of the impact of the drug trade on the migrant communities.” (Benavides 2008:15)

All of these expressions present countless possibilities for further study, each of them could have an analysis of their own where the history and the particular meanings carried out in each one could be taken into account. In this work however, they will stay as a group for the time being. Describing first what they can be as a whole, before turning to one of them more closely to measure the coherence between the particular expressions and the holistic analysis that is proposed by this work.

2. NARCOCULTURE BETWEEN SUBCULTURE, MASS CULTURE AND THE SEMIOSPHERE.

2.1 Theoretical framework

The concepts and theories underlining this theoretical framework are those of *subcultures*, *mass culture*, and the *semiosphere* as applied to the understanding of Mexican narcoculture. The broader approach encompassing those concepts, in this study is sociosemiotics which as mentioned earlier, the work broadly identifies as: *the study of semiosis that is focused on the relationship between the signs and their interpreters, with a particular stress on the social context of the signs, and the way their social meanings are formed*. Like sociosemiotics (Randviir, Copley 2010:122), the work also draws on other disciplines that are dedicated to studying this same relationship –between signs, their context and their interpreters– such as sociology, mass-media studies and cultural studies. These disciplines also offer a wide analysis on the matters of subcultures and mass culture. By taking this multidisciplinary approach, the work aims for an encompassing and richer understanding of the topic at hand.

2.2 Models

The analysis of the theoretical aspects of subculture and mass culture are followed by a visual representation that exemplifies how the theories were employed to frame narcoculture. The objective of such models is to follow the trajectory between the theories and the understanding of our research object. Since the semiosphere is seen as the place where the other two elements (subculture and mass culture) interact, it appears as a third encompassing model that can cover the interaction of the other two.

2.3 Narcoculture as subculture?

The first question concerning subcultures, is whether narcoculture can be defined as a subculture of Mexican culture, or more accurately, one should ask *which subcultural characteristics are present in narcoculture?* This section offers a view on the term particularly from the view point of cultural studies and sociology; applying the outcome to narcoculture.

The academic study of subcultures is wide-ranging going from ethnography to cultural studies. Ken Gelder (2007) recounts the way subcultures have been studied among a wide range of disciplines, offering a list of the six main forms in which they had been previously understood :

1. “Through their often negative relation to work (as idle, parasitical, hedonistic, criminal, etc.)
2. their negative or ambivalent relation to class
3. their association with territory (the street, the hood, the club, etc.) rather than poverty
4. their movement away from home into non-domestic forms of belonging
5. their ties to excess and exaggeration (as opposed to restraint and
6. moderation)
7. their refusal of the banalities of the ordinary life and in particular, of massification.” (Gelder 2007:n.p.)

These parameters are not complementary or necessarily incompatible, and narcoculture can enter into some of these definitions, points number one and five: *usually explained through its criminal ties and through its exaggeration in style* (e.g. the ‘narco-architecture’). However, it can also be contrary to other points like number six: regarding *refusal of banalities or massification*.

In his book, Gelder (2007) also presents two well-known Schools that have approached the topic of subcultures before. The Chicago School of Sociology and the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) also known as the ‘Birmingham Group’. While the former was interested in applying an ethnographic approach to the study of ‘deviant’ behavior- appealing to use participant observation and life stories of gang members (e.g. Frederic M. Thrasher’s *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*) (Gelder 2007:34) - the latter was strongly marked by the work of Dick

Hebdige, centered on matters of class and style for the youth subcultures of Britain (Ibid.92). For Hebdige (2007), one of the most relevant ways to explain the youth subcultures of Britain in the late 1970's was by means of style. The way these youth groups interpreted their class-belonging and decided to react towards their class constraints by re-utilizing and re-symbolizing what was offered to them by mass media, their parents, and core culture. By means of this reinterpretation, they were creating a new stylistic choice loaded with specific meanings and elements of identity.

2.3.1 Narcoculture as spectacular subculture

Hebdige's (2007) approach to narcoculture has been chosen for this work because of his concept of spectacular subculture—that is, obviously fabricated and strongly based on style and its own set of codes (Ibid. 101)—. This concept can be correlated to the chosen expressions of narcoculture that portray the *narco lifestyle*. A spectacular subculture re-appropriates the products offered by the mass media and transforms them by altering their meanings. This can be exemplified by the narcocorridos that use existing mediums (like the traditional corridos), transforming them by applying them to the context of drug traffic and spreading the figure of the drug lord in the popular culture of Mexico.

Hebdige's spectacular subculture is not completely analogous to narcoculture, however it does present some characteristics that are useful to link the subcultures to the products of mass culture, as will be shown in the next section. Those characteristics are mainly what Hebdige calls the *modes of incorporation* (Hebdige 2007:92) applied by the core-culture. For Hebdige, the subculture generates a break in the chain of significations by becoming a *mechanism of semantic disorder* (Ibid.90); contradicting the norm and *breaching the expectations* (Ibid. 91–92): “Spectacular subculture expresses forbidden contents (consciousness of class, consciousness of difference) in forbidden forms (transgressions of sartorial and behavioral codes, law breaking, etc.)”

“The process of recuperation [done by the dominant culture] takes two characteristic forms:

1. The conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.e. the commodity form);

2. The “labelling” and redefinition of deviant behavior by dominant groups- the police, the media, the judiciary (i.e. the ideological form)” (Hebdige 2007:94)

The commodity form refers to the way a subculture becomes a source of mass production. The original innovations become frozen when they are mass produced and “the two forms of incorporation (the semantic/ ideological, and the “real”/commercial) can be said to converge on the commodity form)” (Ibid.96). Even when at the ideological level the subculture might remain unaccepted it can still be a commodity, “it is alternately celebrated (fashion) and/or ridiculed or reviled (described as social problem)” (Ibid.93).

The ideological form (Hebdige 2007:96), or the semantic incorporation, is the form of incorporation that structures the way the subculture will be re-introduced for the acceptance of the general ideology, and it is based on how the core culture deals with the concept of the Other. (Ibid.97): “First, the Other can be trivialized, naturalized, or domesticated. Here difference is simply denied (otherness is reduced to sameness). *Alternatively*, the Other can be transformed into meaningless exotica”. This can be linked to the way narcoculture’s expressions are distributed and consumed, and the way their actors are usually exemplified by the core culture; as previously mentioned in Chapter 1, Benavides (2008) points out that: “The films portray narcos (drug dealers) as ambivalent subjects who, although involved in the illegal drug trade, maintain strong social and personal commitments to their local communities, family members, and friends [...]” (Benavides, 2008:85)¹⁵.

Before passing to the next section, which further develops the connection between subcultures and mass production, a few more words should be said about theories of subcultures. The reason for this is the critique Hebdige’s work received. According to Gelder (2007: 95-96), Hebdige’s study was later seen as lacking strong empirical data, instead applying Some sort of literary critique to youth subcultures; (Ibid.93): “taking subcultural studies in an entirely new direction: away from the earlier sociological and criminological interests of Phil Cohen and Paul Willis, and towards a much more aesthetically focused approached, more akin to literary criticism”. Due to such critiques, it is important to note that even inside sociology, the

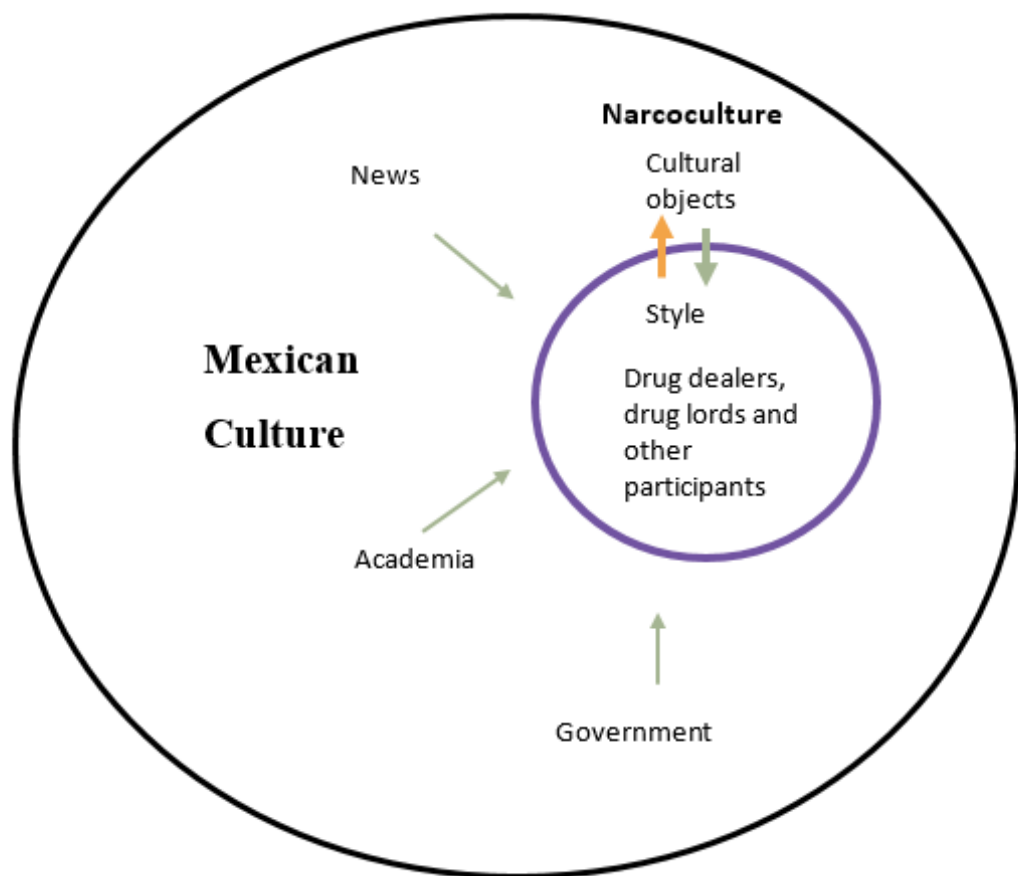
¹⁵This ambivalence will also be present in the lyrics of the narcocorridos, (see Chapter 3).

question of what is an *appropriate subculture's study* remains a topic of debate and that both the ethnographic as well as the class-oriented analysis are under scrutiny (Fine, Kleinman 1979:1). Some of the general criticism made to the methodology of the topic should be then kept in mind when using the term *subculture* for further analysis of narcoculture. Fine and Kleinman (1979:1) list the methodological concerns of the term: for the ethnographic analysis, certain groups or individuals are observed and generalized as the norm for the rest of the members of the subculture. They are said to have failed in explaining the way information or knowledge is shared between those members and other groups, thereby reifying the subculture. Regarding the survey research method, which uses income and race as classificatory variables, they are said to have overlooked particular customs, behaviors, shared understandings and the use of artifacts (Ibid.5). In the last encompassing model presented in this chapter, this work seeks to resolve at least partly some of the problems of the term by highlighting narcoculture's continuous dialogue with other forms; outlining the relationship between narcoculture's expressions to the other mediums (such as the news), because by positioning the subculture as an heuristic dynamic in the wider cultural context, most of the critics to the term can be overcome.

2.3.2 First stage. Narcoculture as a subculture.

By positioning narcoculture, at least partly, as a *spectacular subculture* the drug dealers' lifestyle could be seen as the result of a process of re-signification: as the appropriation of cultural objects—commercial products, and main stream values—by means of style with the aim of exalting one's own identity. Even when the meanings of the subculture are later re-appropriated by the mass culture, the original understanding of the re-signification could seem to remain enclosed, for those that participate in the generation of the lifestyle. The original agents would be the drug dealers and drug lords' beholders and creators of this style, as well as other participants who struggle with the dominant groups by means of challenging the traditional forms with the *narco* style. An external depiction of the style could be made by means of mass media, the academic research, the Government, etc.

Model 1



2.4 Narcoculture in mass culture

This study argues that the concepts of subculture and mass culture are two sides of the same coin. Subculture feeds on the products offered by mass culture and, conversely, mass culture incorporates the meanings inscribed by the subculture to the produced objects to the market. If culture “comprises the complex of institutions, myths, rites, laws, beliefs, codified everyday behavior, value systems and material techniques elaborated by a group of humans”(Eco 1994:119), then mass culture is understood by this work as the practice whereby such beliefs and codified behaviors are embedded into the market system.

Whether we call them subcultural expression or not, narcocultural expressions are an example of the cultural market. The lifestyle of the drug dealers that the expressions portray has already been appropriated by the market and it is part of a mass produced culture where it works as a stylistic option (Sánchez Godoy 2009:82; Simonett, Herrera-Sobek 2004:192). Furthermore, some of the neo-Marxist concepts used by Hebdige (2007:15-16) to study spectacular subcultures, such as Antonio's Gramsci *cultural hegemony* and Louis' Althusser *ideology* are also applicable to the understanding of mass cultural markets more generally. This part of the theoretical outline serves to frame the insertion of narcoculture's expressions in the market; pointing out the struggle between meanings from subcultures and from the *dominant groups of society* (Ibid. 15) inside a market.

2.4.1 Hegemony and mass culture

Hebdige (2007) applies Gramsci's understanding of *hegemony* to explain the struggles between the *dominant groups* of society and the subcultures:

“The term hegemony refers to a situation in which a provisional alliance of certain social groups can exert ‘total social authority’ over other subordinate groups [...] the challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style.” (Hebdige 2007:16-17)

The relationship between the dominant groups and the subcultures, expressed in the market by the re-appropriation of objects, was also mentioned by Fine and Kleinman

(1979) when reviewing the concept of subculture as an open and continuous dialogue: “values, norms, behaviors, and artifacts constitute a subculture only insofar as individuals see themselves as part of a collectivity whose members attribute particular meanings to these ‘objects’” (Fine, Kleinman 1979:13). As a way of exemplifying the process of *double re-appropriation* —the subculture appropriating objects offered by mass culture, and the mass culture consequently incorporating the subcultural style into the market— this study refers to Gottdiener (1985).

Mark Gottdiener (1985) attempted to bring the three elements of producer-object-user into one single semiotic analysis:

“A semiotics of mass culture, then, must trace the ways in which objects produced by industry are *transfunctionalized*. However, because this can take place through the actions of producers as well as those of consumers, the transfunctionalization process characterizes the entire producer/object/user relation.” (Gottdiener 1985:988)

What Gottdiener calls *transfunctionalization* is the process through which objects gain a different function from that initially intended for them by their producers. This transfunctionalization is not only done by the users but by the producers – by those who take the object with its new added meaning and re-launch it. “The key aspect of mass cultural production and control is the process of transfunctionalization, that is, the production and control of ideological meanings” (Gottdiener 1985: 993). This process is similar to what Simonett and Herrera- Sobek (2004) describe for the narcocorridos:

“Commercialized and mediated by the mass media, the narcocorridos call for a redefinition of its kind. Contemporary corridos, not only suffer from a commercial mystification of the drug dealer, but also succumb to the hegemonic power of the culture industry” (Simonett, Herrera- Sobek 2004:180)

The analysis of Gottdiener (1985) is summarized in the following scheme, where objects suffer a continuous re-signification from both users and producers. This general scheme will remind us of Hebdige’s (2007:92) *modes of incorporation*, as in both scenarios the objects that first arrived to the market are already charged with a

meaning before being incorporated or *transfunctionalized* by both the users and the second-time producers.

Gottdiener model of mass culture semiosis

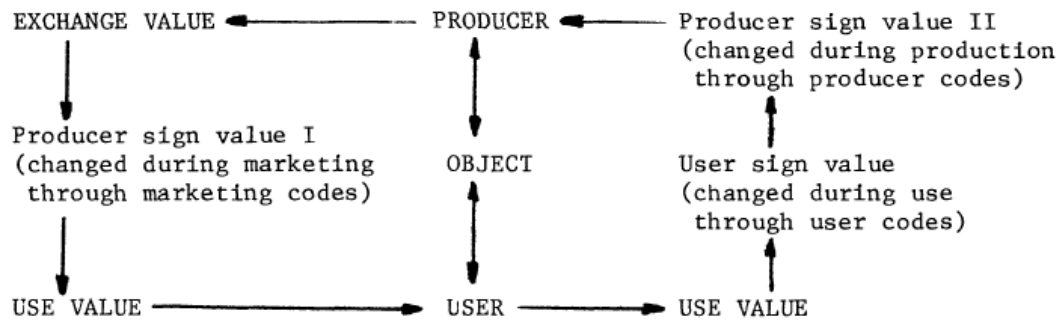


FIG. 3.—The three stages of semiosis

Starting from the top right: **first**, the *exchange value* of the object gets configured by the producer who adds the *producer sign value I* and the object is put out in the market under the first *use value*; **second**, the user interacts with the object which results in a new *user sign value* (transfunctionalization) marked by identification and re-appropriation; and **third**, the producer takes this new use value and transforms it into the *producer sign value II*, putting it out in the market (second transfunctionalization) (Gottdiener 1985:996)

For both Gottdiener and Hebdige, the second part —the revaluation of the object by the user—is the most significant stage since it is marked by individuals using identity and appropriation processes. Meanwhile the first and third actions, despite being oriented towards the user’s response, are homogenized by the producer in order to be more suitable for larger audiences. In this sense for both Hebdige and Gottdiener mass culture changes and diminishes the *user value* by standardizing its meanings. Gottdiener (1985:996): “Subcultural signifiers are divorced from their everyday codes and transfunctionalized by culture industries into more marketable, less radical meanings”, and for Hebdige (2007:96): “as soon as the original innovations which signify ‘subculture’ are translated into commodities and made generally available, they become ‘frozen’. [...] they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise.”

2.4.2 Transmedial worlds and narcoculture

If we go further with narcoculture's expressions and their insertion in the market place, they can be seen as a theme or a *style* offered by mass culture; where its expressions are products controlled by a commercial agenda (Simonett, Herrera-Sobek 2004:193). The concept of *transmedial world* then can be useful to illustrate how the drug lords' lifestyle can work as a theme. A transmedial world, according to Klastrup and Tosca (2004:409), consists of having a set of conceptual properties that can be translated through different media because they are not linked to any specific medium to start with. The characteristics and the general constitution of the abstract world do not depend on the medium of expression but on the world's capability to adapt and to be relinked instantly to its abstract properties. Klastrup and Tosca (Ibid.412) formulated three core features of the transmedial world:

The **mythos**: which constitutes the background story needed to be known in order to understand the different allusions. In this case, the Mexican and US context of drug traffic is the element to which all the manifestations make reference; serving as the common denominator. The **topos**: or the location —geographically and historically. In the case of Mexican narcoculture there is the Mexico-US border; the state of Sinaloa; the north of the country as a generality; and the cities of Juarez, Tijuana, and Culiacan as specific places. All this in a period of approximately 40 years. The topos also includes the aesthetics of the transmedial world (narcoculture's music genres, clothing, architectural designs, type of guns, brands of cars etc.), meaning the specific *style* narcoculture portrays in its expressions. Finally the **ethos**: which includes the codes of behavior and the rules for the different roles. In narcoculture the ethos will be the codes of honor and the values of courage, family loyalty, revenge, generosity, prestige, hedonism, ostentation, utilitarianism, consumerism, religiosity, etc. (Sánchez Godoy 2009:80–81), while the roles will be those of the army, the police, the government, the drug dealers and drug lords, the hitmen, etc.

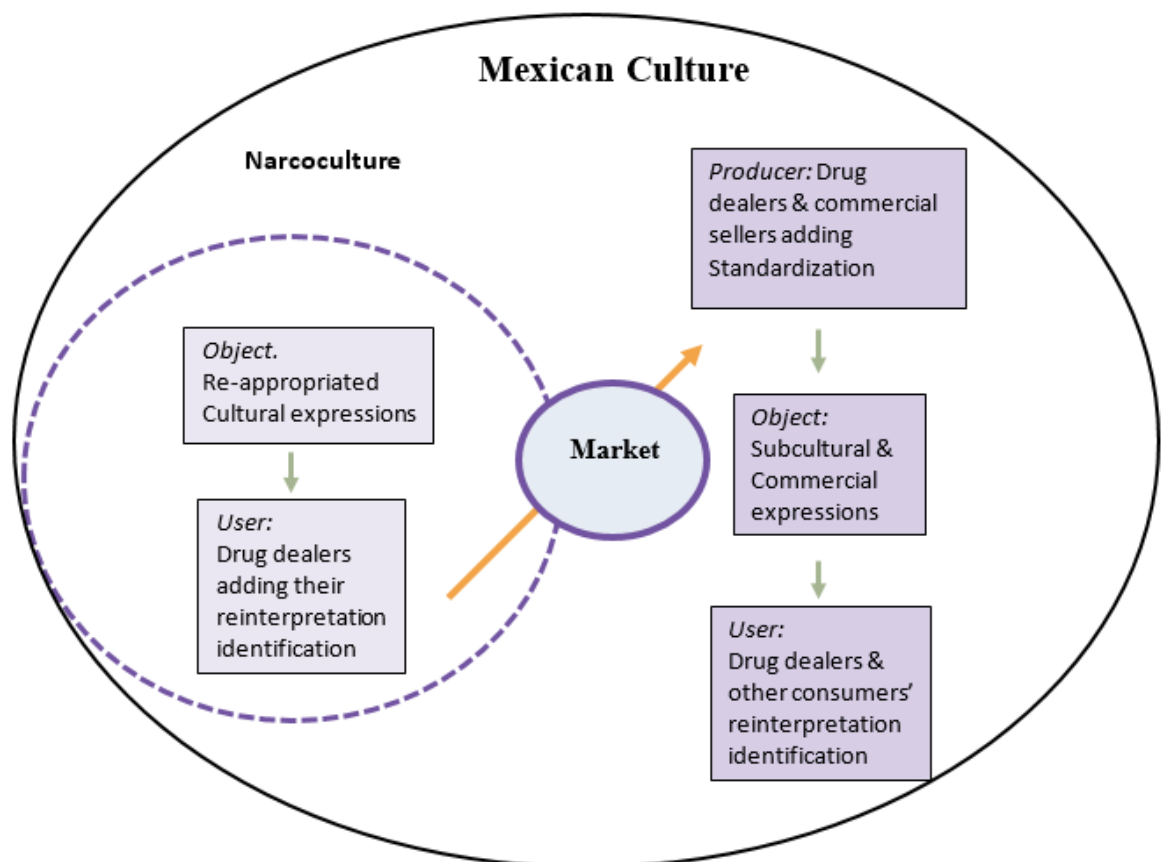
The term transmedial *world* is useful to point out the level of demarcation the drug traffic of the region has. Simply by presenting the conjunction of some of the previous elements, the situation or expression can be labeled as “narco”. The expressions of narcoculture then can be seen as further multimedia manifestations not only of the drug dealers but of the drug traffic in general. As Klastrup and Tosca (2004) note: “The point is that by encountering one of the world's actualizations (...), the

imaginary construct of the world is evoked in the participant's imagination, and each simple act gains a much wider meaning." (Klastrup, Tosca 2004:409)

2.4.3 Second stage. Narcoculture embedded in mass culture

Based on Gottdiener's previous scheme, this is the form whereby the drug traffic, and in particular the *lifestyle* of the drug dealers, can be introduced to the market as a thematic. Here the first round of subcultural appropriation was already taken by the market, sold out, and homogenized to reach larger audiences. Narcoculture in its first stage can be considered an alternative if it is juxtaposed with the dominant groups, but here its meanings get transported and homogenized. The producer-object-user relationship includes as users not only the original members of the subculture, but also all the other consumers and producers not originally involved who eventually take part in the chain of meanings. The meanings implemented by the producers tend to be more dominant than the re-appropriations of the consumers.

Model 2



2.5 Narcoculture in the semiosphere

At this point of the analysis, the implementation of the concept of *semiosphere* makes room for at least two significant changes. First, the study of both previous stages of narcoculture—the subcultural and the mass cultural—can be seen as a continual dialogue that goes beyond the transfunctionalization of objects. Mass culture here is not perceived in a negative sense—diminishing the meanings of the subcultural values—but as a constructive counterpart. Second, it serves to add other elements such as identity, memory, and the different territories (Mexico and United States of America) into the study of narcoculture’s expressions. The semiosphere helps to locate the expressions of narcoculture not as an enclosed manifestation but as a fluid one.

The semiotic space or semiosphere, according to Lotman (2009):

“[...] appears before us as the multi-layered intersection of various texts, which are woven together in a specific layer characterized by complex internal relationships and variable degrees of translatability and spaces of untranslatability. The layer of “reality” is located underneath this textual layer, the kind of reality that is organized by a multiplicity of languages and has a hierarchical relationship with them.” (Lotman 2009:23)

In the semiosphere different elements that run from complete mutual translatability to just as complete mutual untranslatability converge (Lotman 1990:125). The possibility of generating new elements, hence the fluidity of the semiosphere, depends on the margin of untranslatability between the different elements. For narcoculture’s expressions—seen at the midst of the interaction between the spectacular subculture and the mass culture—the struggle of discourses, meanings, and significations between the dominant and the subcultural (Hebdige 2007:17) would be the one allowing novelty in the semiosphere of Mexican narcoculture.

2.5.1 Boundaries of narcoculture’s semiosphere.

The concept of boundary aids an understanding of the mobility and the innovation between semiospheres. Lotman (1990:136) writes: “The notion of boundary is an ambivalent one: it both separates and unites. It is always the boundary of something and so it belongs to both frontier cultures, to both contiguous

semiospheres”. The boundary does not only concern the semiosphere as a whole because inside it there are many other boundaries of diverse levels of differentiation. Between all these boundaries communication and translation occurs. Innovation here comes from the communication between external and internal boundaries, where elements of one specific language get reconfigured into another language.

“The function of any boundary or filter [...] is to control, filter, and *adapt the external into the internal*. This invariant function is realized in different ways on different levels. On the level of the semiosphere it implies a separation of ‘one’s own’ from ‘someone else’s’, the filtering of what comes from outside and its treated as a text in another language, and the translation of this text into one’s own language. In this way external space becomes structured [...]”
(Lotman 1990: 140)

For the Mexican narcoculture as presented in this study, it is possible to differentiate at least three boundaries located at different levels:

1. The boundary between spectacular subcultures (appropriation through style and transfunctionalization) and mass culture (second degree transfunctionalization or incorporation by producers).
 - 1.1. The boundary between positive and negative representations of the drug lords (otherness/exotization vs. sameness/familiarization in Hebdige (2007: 94))
2. The boundary between the Mexican and the US cultures.

The first boundary, marked by the theories of Hebdige and Gottdiener, can be exemplified by the way the lifestyle of the drug lords (portrayed by narcoculture’s expressions) has been re-appropriated by larger audiences inside the marketplace. Here, the drug dealers’ codes of behavior are re-signified by producers, generating and maintaining new representations that are spread throughout the mass media (Sánchez Godoy 2009:81–85; Simonett, Herrera-Sobek 2004:192)

The second boundary is within the first one; after the meanings surrounding the drug dealers’ lifestyle are translated by the mass culture, these can serve for further differentiation or familiarization. Inside the expressions: the drug dealers and their lifestyle, can be portrayed as either adventurous/glamorous or alien/deviant. Conversely the whole expressions can be: related to identity, narcoculture as the cultural expression of the conflict, or to differentiation: narcoculture as an exaltation

of drugs and violence in popular culture. More about this boundary of meanings will be exemplified with the narcocorridos in Chapter 3.

The third boundary is the one between the semiospheres of the Mexican and United States' cultures—particularly the immigrant culture in United States. The drug traffic between both countries has a strong presence on both sides of the border, as does the phenomenon of narcoculture. The vast presence of narcoculture in both territories is evidenced not only by the constant reference to both places in the expressions, but also by the amount of production and consumption presented in Mexico (Campbell 2009:271; Sánchez Godoy 2009:82) and in the United States, especially among immigrant communities from Latin America (Benavides 2008:2)(Ramírez-Pimienta 2011:75).

The three boundaries can serve as meanings of identity, and enter in a relationship of dependence, as stated by Lotman (1990):

“Since the boundary is necessary part of the semiosphere and there can be no ‘us’ without ‘them’, culture creates not only its own type of internal organization but also its own type of external ‘disorganization’. In this sense it can we can say that the ‘barbarian’ is created by the civilization and needs it as much as it needs him” (Lotman 1990: 141)

2.5.2 Identity and memory in narcoculture's semiosphere

In the semiosphere, no side is independent. Despite seemingly opposite forms (mass culture—subcultural), (center—periphery), (I—other), the sides are always correspondingly dependent on the other to construct and hold their own narratives of identity. The concept of semiosphere allows for the element of identity, which is important for the understanding of narcoculture's expressions, to enter as a factor influencing the continuous dialogue (the margin of translatability or untranslatability between boundaries) of narcoculture's semiosphere.

Narcoculture's expressions can have intricate links with the construction of cultural identities¹⁶. For example the narcocorridos, as it will be presented in the

¹⁶According to Torop (2012:551): “Cultural identity depends on the relation between the preserved and the created, or between the old and the new, in the life of a human being or of a culture [...] expressed

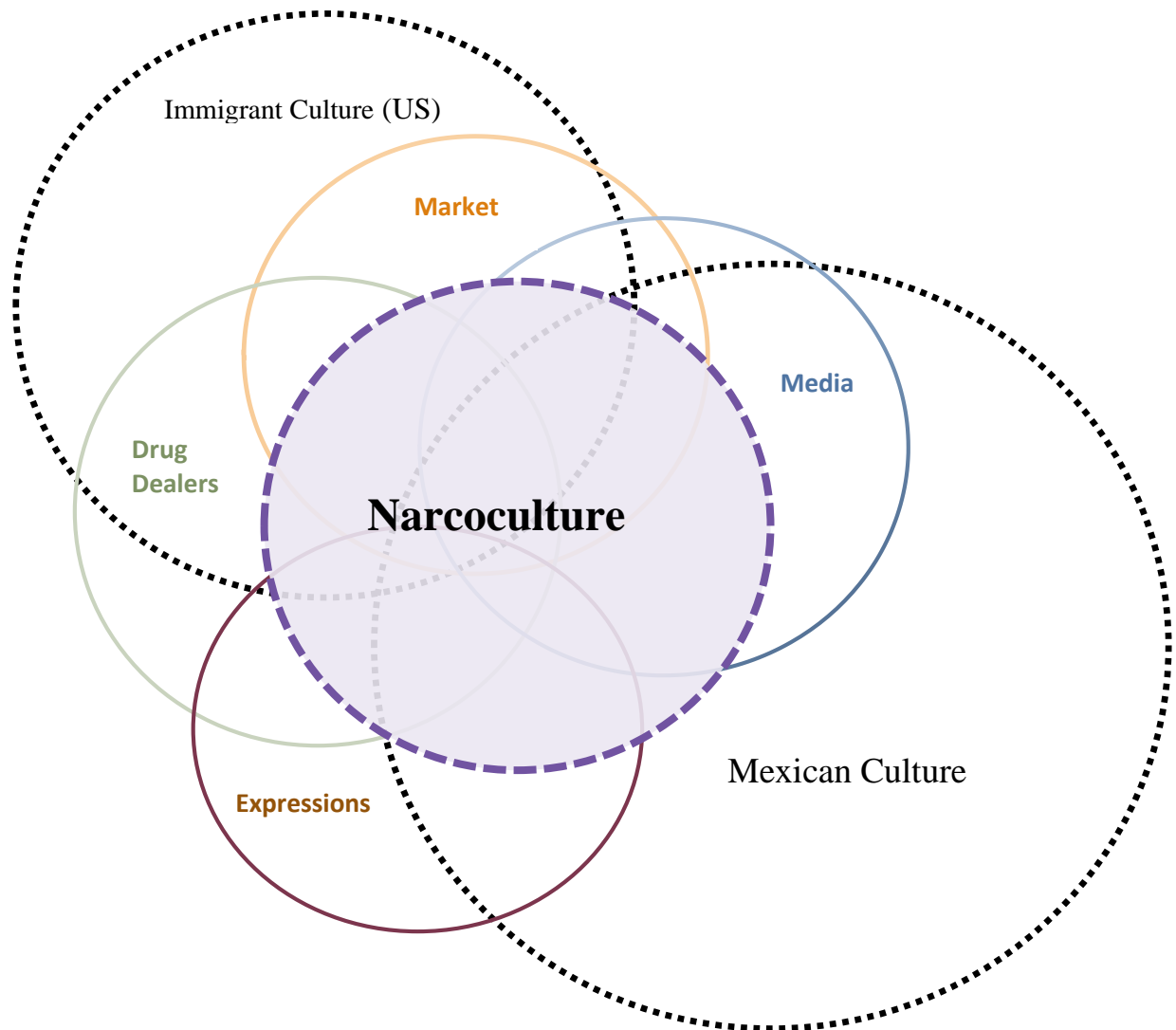
following chapter, can be linked to the traditional corrido and related to the construction of memory as part of the oral history of the country. The narcocorridos and the rest of the narcoculture's expressions also show a reconfiguration of the past and the present by exposing events that are already registered inside other sources like the news; retelling facts of the drug traffic they help to generate new histories and a new memory around the topic.

2.5.3 *Third stage. Narcoculture a semiosphere*

The last representation includes the apparent double stage of narcoculture: that is, the subcultural stage alongside the massively produced stage (but in this one other forms such as identity are present). The phenomenon exists at the intersection of all the other elements as a dynamic process, rather than a finished and delimited world.

Here the market exists not as an opposite that comes to change the dynamic but as a complementary counterpart. The agents include once again the original agents of the subcultural meanings, the commercial producers, the consumers of the produced expressions that are not necessarily involved in the drug traffic, as well as the rest of the individuals that perceive and interact directly or indirectly with the phenomenon –consumers or not of the expressions. Depictions are made by multiple sources and re-appropriated not only by the consumers but by everyone in contact with them. Narcoculture here is not present only inside the semiosphere of Mexican culture because it is in interaction with other semiospheres like the US immigrant culture. At the point where narcoculture is located we can include narcoculture as a means of identity, narcoculture as a source of historical information and modification memories, and finally also narcoculture as a marketing theme.

in the ways of merging the contemporary and the heritage culture, or in the specificity of interpreting one's own present and past”



3. THE NARCOCORRIDO.

By analyzing the specific cultural manifestations of narcoculture within the frame of the semiosphere, subcultures and mass-culture, it will be easier to understand not only their eclectic origins but also their influence and their continuous spread during the past recent years. On the following section the work focuses on a particular expression of narcoculture —the *narcocorridos*— aiming to understand how its different elements interact in the semiotic space. The reason to choose this particular expression is because it helps to illustrate many of the previously mentioned elements, even more these songs present the two main characteristics of the other expressions listed here: they can work as descriptive forms of the lifestyle of the drug dealers, and they can count with the active participation of drug dealers for they production. Additionally, they can be approached through their lyrics as examples of collective memory; in comparison to the traditional corrido –as an evolution of oral history; or in their production and consumption patterns. However only by taking into account the complete framework in which they act as meaning-carriers is that they can be seen as part of a continuous dialogue.

3.1 The encompassing form of the narcocorrido

The narcocorrido can be seen as the derivation of two elements: the *traditional corrido* –in its narrative style; and as a subgenre of *música norteña* (literally “northern music”). The first corridos of Mexico date back to the 16th Century, these now *traditional* corridos are ballad-style-songs that derived from other musical forms taken from Spain to Mexico during the Spanish Colony. The traditional Mexican corrido has a “epic-lyric-narrative” (Astorga 1997:92) with the elements of *introduction of the singer, prologue to the story, development of the anecdote, morals, and farewell from the singer* (Meléndrez 2011:48). The traditional corrido played a

relevant part in the oral history of Mexico since it served as a medium to propagate news among the different towns. During the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) for example, it had one of its greatest impulses, the corridos produced during that period told stories and news about the war, with their protagonists being the rebels, the platoons, and the women fighting alongside (Astorga 2004:94).

The relatively new *narco-corrido* (booming in the 1970's, though there are traces of corridos with the drug traffic thematic since the 1930's (Ramírez-Pimienta 2011:33)), still keeps some of the characteristics of the traditional one, such as the narrative forms of greeting and farewell which are still quite common in their lyrics. Nonetheless they do not hold the previous settled form of: introduction, development and conclusion, even more the main plot topics and the ways of mass production and consumption are also all different. Many narcocorridos still tell stories draw on actual facts and they are still today in some way part of the popular and cultural history of the country. They carry a big set of values in their lyrics, telling the stories of the drugs dealers and the drug trafficking world usually taking the side of the outlaw, a fact that makes them current and abundant sources of meaning but subject of moral and political scrutiny¹⁷. The following section is dedicated to highlight the specific aspects of production, consumption and identity (subcultural and mass culture aspects) present in the songs, bringing up their undeniable intersections.

3.2 Production and consumption of the narcocorrido.

Since the outbreak of the Mexican “War on Drugs” (December 2006), pronounced by the former president of Mexico Felipe de Jesús Calderón Hinojosa, violent confrontations between the cartels and the government have had a tangible rising up. The increment was mirrored in the media and by the rising popularity of the narcocorridos and the other expressions of narcoculture. It was during the following years (2011) that the prohibition of narcocorridos in live concerts and in radio transmissions came to be imposed to the Mexican state of Sinaloa. The base for such

¹⁷ EFE. 2015. “El Municipio de Chihuahua Impondrá Cárcel a Quien Cante ‘Narcocorridos.’” *CNN México*. Retrieved April 16, 2015.

Valdez Cárdenas, Javier. 2011. “Restaurantes y Bares de Sinaloa No Podrán Difundir Narcocorridos.” *La Jornada*, February 11, 2011.

prohibition was the way these songs depicted and glorified the drug trade as part of a *lifestyle*, also the way they were believed to be part of a drug-cartel propaganda aimed to *legitimatize* the drug lords by venerating them as heroes (EFE 2015; Sánchez Godoy 2009:85; Valdez Cárdenas 2011). Because of this and other similar scenarios, it is important to contextualize the narcocorridos inside their dynamics of production and consumption.

3.3.1 Production

Departing from the side of the production it is possible to distinguish heuristically between two different types of narcocorridos: those that are *custom-made* or private, and the rest commonly called *commercial narcocorridos*. The main distinction is on who pays for them, the custom-made songs are paid and ordered by the drug dealers themselves, their families or their friends, while the commercial are usually produced by music bands under seemingly no special request. The commercial songs are believed to answer to the demand of the market and they seem to be written with the solely purpose of creating profits for the music groups, while the former are believed to form part of a dynamic of showing off one's own status –when ordered for oneself, or for showing respect –when ordered for a living or deceased member of the family or a close friend (Simonett , Herrera-Sobek 2004:187).

3.3.1.1 The custom-made narcocorridos

The lines through which custom made narcocorridos are produced and distributed is not completely clear, Simonett and Herrera-Sobek (2004) describe the process as it follows:

“The private corridos are composed, generally, under the request of an individual that just as the public suspects, wants to be immortalized or to immortalize the person to whom the ballad is dedicated to. The composer and the customer know each other, they have mutual friends or they frequent the same places. The customer usually gives to the *corridista* (singer or composer of corridos) a list with the biographical data that he wants mentioned: the names of his friends, specific places, the brand of his new car, his favorite gun, details of his prowess, etc. The composer does what the customer desires. He displays

the information in octosyllabic and borrows some formulas from the traditional corrido to prink the information, he arranges all this in a simple melody based on a simple chord progression. The customer pays for the corrido to the composer, to the musicians during the recording session and to the recording studio for the production of the master tape” (Simonett, Herrera-Sobek 2004:189)

This same dynamic was portrayed in the documentary *Narco Cultura* (2013) directed by the photographer Shaul Schwarz. Schwarz follows the leading singer of a popular narcocorrido band (“Los Bukanas de Culiacán”) living in Los Angeles, California; and in parallel a forensic detective working for the government in the Mexican border city of Juarez. The documentary shows how the singer and his band are not directly involved in the drug traffic business but are nevertheless *acquaintances* with some drug dealers living in Mexico who ask them for the songs. The documentary records the monetary transaction between the singer and the drug lord, some of the concerts that the band gives in both Mexico and the US, as well as their private parties, and some of the singer’s thoughts on the topic of drug traffic. Despite this clear example and the information given to Simonett and Herrera-sober by their anonymous sources, it is difficult to trace the number of narcocorrido bands that take direct requests from drug lords and those that do not, even more difficult is to delimit to what extent these bands are involved in any other activities related to drug traffic.

3.3.1.2 The commercial narcocorridos.

Among some the most famous bands doing *commercial narcocorridos* are “Los Tigres del Norte”. This band, according to Ramírez-Pimienta (2011:75), has been seen mistakenly as the first band ever singing narcocorridos. Ramírez-Pimienta mentioned on his book that there are corridos with the drug traffic thematic since the 1930’s, and that “Los Tigres del Norte” are just the responsible for the booming of the narcocorrido genre in the 1970’s, especially after their song *Contrabando y Traición* (Smuggling and Treason) recorded in 1973 (Ibid.75). The band is originative from Sinaloa, Mexico but all of its members immigrated to San José, California, where they reached fame first among the Mexican community living in the United States and then in Mexico. The band composes songs mixing real-life events with fiction, and they managed to become

world famous and a symbol of identity for the millions of Mexican immigrants living in the US (Ramírez-Pimienta 2011:78).

According to Simonett and Herrera-Sobek (2004) in their commercial form the narcocorridos have no real reflection of the sentiments of people or their morality, instead they are just the result of a deliberated marketing analysis that seeks to sell and that furthermore praises drug traffic inside popular music: “The commercial [narco] corridos are nevertheless, not the ‘artistic expression’ of the people but instead a million dollar market with enormous profits and with international brands competing for it” (Ibid.193).

The commercial narcocorrido could be related then to Gottdiener and Hebdige in the way mass culture appropriates subcultural values, however it is difficult to completely agree with the statement of them not being a *people’s expression*. First, because the dividing line between both forms of corrido is not as clear as it could appear, and second because even when the narcocorridos are the production of commercial bands, these bands are also working in a continuous dialogue with their own context and the available representations of drug traffic that can be found there.

What is more, it could be argued that the custom made songs are not a *direct expressions* emerging from the drug lords’ context either. In the documentary of Shaul Swartz it is shown how the young band leader is given some information about the drug lord that wants his custom made song, and how the singer constantly worries over generating the rest of the lyrics based on his *outside* knowledge of the Mexican culture. This because the singer had lived all of his life in the US and was not really used to the Spanish slang he would like to incorporate on his songs. Like this the singer, which is the final producer of the custom made songs, incorporates the real facts but just like in the other commercial songs, he adds part of his own imaginary. Furthermore the strongest composers of both, the custom made and the commercial narcocorridos, can be located outside Mexico hence experience the “Drug War” in a complete different way than the drug dealers of the other side of the border.

The possible dichotomies regarding the value of the songs, whether commercial or custom made, can be reduced if we locate them as part of a continuous dialogue (semiosphere); where the different elements interact and the meanings are translated from one form to the other. The commercial songs then, retain significance because they act as further propagators of the style, which could influence the further individual

recurrence of custom made songs. Here even when the commercial songs are inside an institutional frame of cultural production, they work as direct or indirect results of social and cultural contexts and as *forms of collective catharsis* (Astorga 2004:139) used to describe the phenomenon of drug traffic in the region. Concluding that narcocorridos first as constructs of identity, and second as market productions, both take pre-existing representations of the drug lords.

3.3.2 Consumption

On matters of consumption, it is important to mention that since many of the well-known bands, the music labels that produce their albums, and many of the live concerts that include narcocorridos, are currently based in the United States, also much of the profits are located there. Needless to say that the violent situation as well as the context of the “Drug War” on both sides of the border is drastically different, this fact further evidences that the consumption hence the identification with the songs is not limited to the drug dealers or to the violent context of the cartels, but that it can be extended to other groups that furnish these same songs with diverse meanings. For example, that of *Mexican or Latin American identity* for the case of first, second or third-generation immigrants living in the US (Ramírez-Pimienta 2011:95).

3.4 The narcocorrido in dialogue

This subchapter considers the relationship between the narcocorridos and other forms outside narcoculture, specifically the news’ coverage of the drug traffic. The segment is focused to the comparison between news and songs regarding the case of an infamous drug lord (Joaquin Archivaldo Guzman Loera). The reason for highlighting the intercalation of meanings between both mediums, is that during the course of the translation, meanings going from one medium to the other (internal or external to narcoculture) suffer not only a revalorization or re-signification but also a concretization inside the semiosphere.

Joaquin Archivaldo Guzman Loera also known as “El Chapo” Guzman, is a former drug lord head of the *Sinaloa cartel*. Guzman was arrested on February of 2014 and he is the subject of several references in both, the news and the narcocorridos. His specific example will help us to illustrate the interaction of the different forms over one single topic.

On the news he is was often described as the main kingpin of drug traffic in Mexico:

1. Since 2009 he was listed every year in the *Forbes*¹⁸ magazine as one of the most powerful men in the world.
2. In the Mexican newspaper *El Universal* (15th June, 2011), an article was published in calling “El Chapo” *the most important drug trafficker in the history*, according to some information given by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) of the United States. “For the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Joaquin Guzman Loera has become the most important drug trafficker in the world, and his power has surpassed the deceased Pablo Escobar.” (Solís 2011: n.p.)
3. In January of 2012 *La Jornada* (15th January, 2012), one of the main Mexican newspapers with national coverage, published an article on him that summarized the eleven-year period in which he escaped from prison and managed to regain wealth, his scape form prison here is described as ‘fantastic’ and unimaginable: “With his escape, Guzman Loera highlighted the vulnerability of a prison system that was considered incorruptible and escape-proof” (Castillo García 2012: n.p.).
4. *The Observer*, sister paper of the national British paper *The Guardian*, released an article just after Guzman’s apprehension in 2014. The personal characteristics of Guzman were also mentioned:

“Mexico's most infamous drug lord, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, has been captured, 13 years after escaping from a high-security jail. [...] The 57-year-old, five foot six inches tall, Guzmán, whose nickname means "short and stocky", grew up in a poverty-stricken village in the mountains of Sinaloa, an area famed for producing trafficking families within the state often referred to as "the cradle of Mexican drug trafficking.

Barely educated, though reputedly highly intelligent, Chapo rose to become a second-tier drug lord in the late 1980s,[...] his escape underlined the level of corruption in Mexican jails, and ushered in his new rise to the status of the country's most embarrassing fugitive included by Forbes in both its lists of the wealthiest and most powerful people in the world.” (Tuckman 2014: n.p.)

¹⁸ American Business Magazine that publishes annually a list of the richest men on earth. Their rankings can be found at <http://www.forbes.com>

These are just some few examples of his numerous allusions on both the Mexican and the international press; in the following section three narcocorridos dedicated to him will be presented in order to contrast the information presented, these songs that also describe him and his life in the lyrics show the interaction of both discourses.

Among many of the songs dedicated to him it is possible to find different emphasis: the ones that describe his life-story and his ascension to the power, the ones narrating specific events *e.g.* his escape from prison or his reaction after his son's death; and the ones more focused on his personal character and his abilities to outplay the law, the police, the military, the government or any other enemy. As an example of this last group, extracts from three songs are presented here (while the complete lyrics can be found in the Annexes of this work): *El Rey de la Sierra* (2008) (The King of the Mountains) by Fabian Ortega, *El Señor de la Montaña* (2007) (The Lord of the Mountain) by "Los Canelos de Durango", and *El Chapo Guzmán* (2007) by José Eulogio Hernández¹⁹.

The lyrics first tend to highlight the general qualities and the personality of "El Chapo" showing admiration, sympathy, and acclamation, consequently these could be seen in direct opposition to the way the character gets portrayed by the government (mainly as an outlaw and a criminal), however as we will see the words and the events, once the strong favoritism in them is overlooked, are not far from the ones presented in the news.

The positive description of "El Chapo" (or "El Chapo" as the great fighter):

*An enviable capability/to have so many people under command
How he does it? How can he do it? /to keep them working
maybe it is because the sir/also began from the bottom.
(El Rey de la Sierra)*

*I have the best groups /although I live in the mountains,
and I have my Taliban²⁰, /graduated from the best schools
Who said I'm chapo²¹? /when I have so much greatness
(El Rey de la Sierra)*

¹⁹ The full songs in Spanish can also be found in the annexes of the preset work.

²⁰ The term *talibanes* in Spanish (Taliban in English, from the singular Talib) is commonly used in the narcoculture context closely related to its Arabic meaning "students", or in this case lower-rank drug dealers. However in some cases it can also make reference to Ivan Velazquez Caballero alias "El Taliban" former head of a drug cartel named "Los Zetas".

²¹ "Chapo" is a slang word used to refer to someone short of height, Joaquín Guzmán Loera gets his nickname from this word.

*Joaquín Loera is and will be /fugitive from justice
The Lord of the mountain/also the boss of the town
(El Señor de la Montaña)*

*From head to toe/he is of short stature,
from head to the sky/ is how I measure his height,
Because he is great among the greats/ find someone to doubt it.
(El Chapo Guzmán)*

Through the lyrics it is also possible to see different forms used as means for identification. Many times his character gets justify thanks to his struggles to ascend into power, and his humble beginnings are always mentioned. There is also the constant use of the dichotomy of *us* versus *them*, alluding in this way to a wide range of audiences. In some cases *us* is anyone economically poor or an outcast, as he once was, and in other more narrow interpellations *us* is only the people involved in drug traffic or the members of his specific cartel. Identification is also used when exalting Guzman's human characteristics, for example when he is presented as a loving human being. Peculiar example of this is his vast amount of offspring with different women which is often depicted as an example of *his vast love* and his manhood. Distinctively the *other* is often played by the Mexican or the American governments, the military, the police and the other criminal organizations which can at any moment be considered his rivals:

*Friends' friend, /Enemy's enemy,
happy and in love /that is how Loera is and will be.
(El Señor de la Montaña)*

*I'm the Uncle for my nephews / for others, Chapo Guzmán.
(El Chapo Guzmán)*

*Used to give orders /he also knows how to listen to you,
stood out among the great /just check out his story,
he put down roots in love /there is lot of his offspring out there.
(El Chapo Guzmán)*

*He experienced poverty /he experienced wealth,
if he gets respected, he respects, /if he gets offended, he loses his temper
(El Chapo Guzmán)*

*Sometimes in great residences, /sometimes in camping tents,
radios and machine guns, /sleeping on the floor, or on the bed,
Ceiling caves sometimes; /Joaquín El Chapo they call him
(El Chapo Guzmán)*

“El Chapo” is usually described as superior compared to the military, however he is also seen as equal to them. This is an intricate topic that puts out-front the involvement that at certain degree the military or the authorities have had with the criminal organizations, and that has become part of public knowledge over the years:

*He is backed up by a Colonel/he is not a soldier by degree
his father inherited him, /to my friend the Colonel,
Captains general, /they haven't been able to retire him.
(El Señor de la Montaña)*

*In the mafia and in the cartels /they always have their agreements
although there are differences /same happens in the government.
“Do not upset me/because I will break you”.
(El Rey de la Sierra)*

In the lyrics “El Chapo” is often mystified:

*That is why the blue sky /protects him from afar
Even if it is cold or hot
(El Señor de la Montaña)*

*he is fierce and in the mountains /and also in the jungle
he protects, and if he wants he catches
(El Señor de la Montaña)*

*and from hell he escapes, / and crosses himself in the church.
(El Chapo Guzmán)*

*from the head to the sky /is how I measure his height,
because he is great among the greats/ find someone to doubt it.
(EL Chapo Guzmán)*

Nevertheless the *mystical* reconstruction of this character is not delimited to just one system of meanings, this fact can also be supported by the other media that constantly describes and highlights his importance by calling him “One of the richest men in the world” or “Public Enemy number one” as shown in the previous news articles.

Something similar happens with the depiction of the drug traffic scenario in general. In the press releases some places like the Mexican state of Sinaloa are often described as *red zones* or *focal points* of violence and criminality, and the same happens in the songs. However, in the narcoculture sphere the fact that “El Chapo” was born in that state and that he was head of the cartel of the area, are seen as a reasons of pride. In the next extract it is possible to see how —as previously mentioned in the article of *The Observer*, a song dedicated to “EL Chapo” makes a reference to the Sinaloa state as “the cradle of drug traffickers”:

*Sinaloa is a key point /for the brave upbringing
it has produced the best /nobody can denied it
in the share of gangsters, /Sinaloa is always present*
(El Rey de la Sierra)

Finally on the level of form, the greetings and farewells present in the traditional corridos are still visible in some of these narcocorridos:

*Through this corrido /I will send my greetings
to those old friends /I have not been able to forget*
(El Chapo Guzmán)

*I greet the captains /that fly night and day
from cities to mountains, /and from mountains to borders
especially to the capiruri /that has crossed borders.*
(El Señor de la Montaña)

*You all know the sir / you all can imagine of whom I am talking
the one who lives in the mountains, /of El Chapo, I am talking.
I dedicate to him this corrido /the same one you are now listening.*
(El Rey de la Sierra)

From the brief extracts of the songs it is possible to see how the narcocorridos can describe the drug lords, and how despite of being working as dedications (which means they were not requested by the drug lord), they include sets of values, a distinct veneration towards the outlaw and a re-appropriation of facts of popular knowledge. If we were to compare these commercial songs to one of Hebdige’s (2007) *modes of incorporation* of the subcultural by the dominant culture, it would be difficult to delimit them as either a process of familiarization or as a way of turning the drug dealers into *exotica* (Ibid.97). The meanings surrounding the songs seem to be deeply

embedded in both realms the subcultural and the mass culture, a fact that makes the use of the semiotic space, even more helpful to understand their interaction.

3.5 Identity and memory in the narcocorrido.

The narcocorridos can be seen as historically relevant in basically two levels: compared to their previous musical forms inside a story-telling culture; or in themselves as cultural expressions. These ballads cannot be considered *exact* historical documents of real-life events (not that any *official historical document* can be considered to be *exact*), and they are not competing with the other sources such as newspapers or official statements at the same level of *objective* or verifiable *data*. The narcocorridos, nevertheless can still serve as means of legitimation (Sánchez Godoy 2009:85), just like the news or the official statements, but in a different way by glorifying certain illegal activities as part of a *lifestyle*. They take a stand from what seems an almost opposite side of the story and with this they help to reshape the way the history of drug trade is being re-told, hence also the construction of the memory around the phenomenon.

The narcocorridos additionally, can work as sources of identification not only for the drug dealer who sees in the songs the stylization and the *glamorization* of his endeavors, but also for the person who lives in direct or indirect interaction with the drug traffic of the region. The songs are not only meaningful for those who request and paid for them but for a far greater audience. For example: for those who identify the places like the cities or small towns described in the lyrics; for those Mexican or Mexican-Americans living in the United States that see in the narcocorridos some sort of nostalgic link to their roots; for to those who enjoy the *música norteña* genre in general and who might or might not pay attention to the lyrics, and finally to those followers of the *narco-lifestyle* who were attracted by the sense of community it generated and its stylistic characteristics.

3.6 (Conclusion) The narcocorrido as a continuous dialogue inside the semiosphere

The songs could first, superficially idealize and justify the criminal endeavors by making them appear glamorous and adventurous, also become meaningful for people inside or outside the drug traffic by generating a series of diverse meanings —not

limited to glamour or status, but including identification or differentiation to people, places or activities. Second they could be an example of Eco's (1994) parasitic counter-culture²², which means that their opposition to the dominant culture is in fact an accepted deviance, and that they depend on the dominant to survive. In this particular case they depend on the market structure to thrive, which again brings them closer to be a spectacular subculture in Hebdige's terms, but with many other factors involved in them. For example, the lines of production, consumption, and identification determining the meanings carried in these songs are not entirely fix.

In matters of production we have that there are not solely limited to the drug dealers or the commercial bands; that both types of narcocorridos refer to real and fictitious elements, and that the discourse portrayed in the media can be followed closely in comparison to the one given in some lyrics of the songs. Also both forms (private or commercial) can generate means of identity because their audiences go beyond the drug dealers or the people immerse in the context of the Drug War. Thus the consumption of these expressions is not determined by the proximity to a specific context but by the diverse set of meanings they can produce. An example of this is the vast consumption that this music has in the United States where the repercussions of the "Drug War" are notably different and where these songs are not necessarily linked to the same context and meaning that they are in Mexico.

Thus in matters of identification, this type of *foreign identification* with an outside context is not only a present among the borders but within the limits of the country itself. In the bigger cities of Mexico where the drug lords are generally more discreet and where the drug cartels are not so overt, the context and the everyday life have a different rhythm than in those small towns or violent cities where drug traffic is part of the everyday (Sánchez Godoy 2009:79). And so, for a large number of Mexicans the violent context of the drug traffic is also a foreign context, so much so that it could be happening on the other side of the border. Still this *external* audiences, inside or outside Mexico, can also generate meanings around these songs and this music genre, including forms of identity with different referents and different consequences but working alongside the rest of the meanings inside the semiotic space.

²² "The dominant culture tolerates parasitic counter-cultures as a more or less innocuous deviations, but it cannot accept critical manifestations which call it into question." (Eco 1994:124)

Furthermore, the songs next to the news, and the other forms of narcoculture; interact and generate social representations of *what* a drug lord is, and what his values, taste, and aesthetics are. Consequently even when narcoculture could be seen as *barbaric* or as a *non-culture* by Haidar and Chávez Herrera (2014: 1), it is difficult to set the expressions in themselves as outsiders or even as peripheral to the Mexican semiosphere; because their mere existence in the market and the popular culture shows the big number of meanings and referents they have.

The boundary between positive and negative representations of the drug lords, can also be exemplify in the internal dynamics of the narcocorridos. The values of status, luxuriance, manliness, virility, extravagance, violence, recklessness and debauchery that are exalted in the drug dealers' lifestyle can position their protagonists as outsiders. And so even when the expressions of narcoculture, specially the descriptive ones (books, novels, soap operas, narcocorridos) are closer to the center of the semiosphere acting as well-structured texts, this does not mean that their protagonists can do the same, on the contrary the exaltation of their description can help to mark the line between *them* and *us* more strongly.

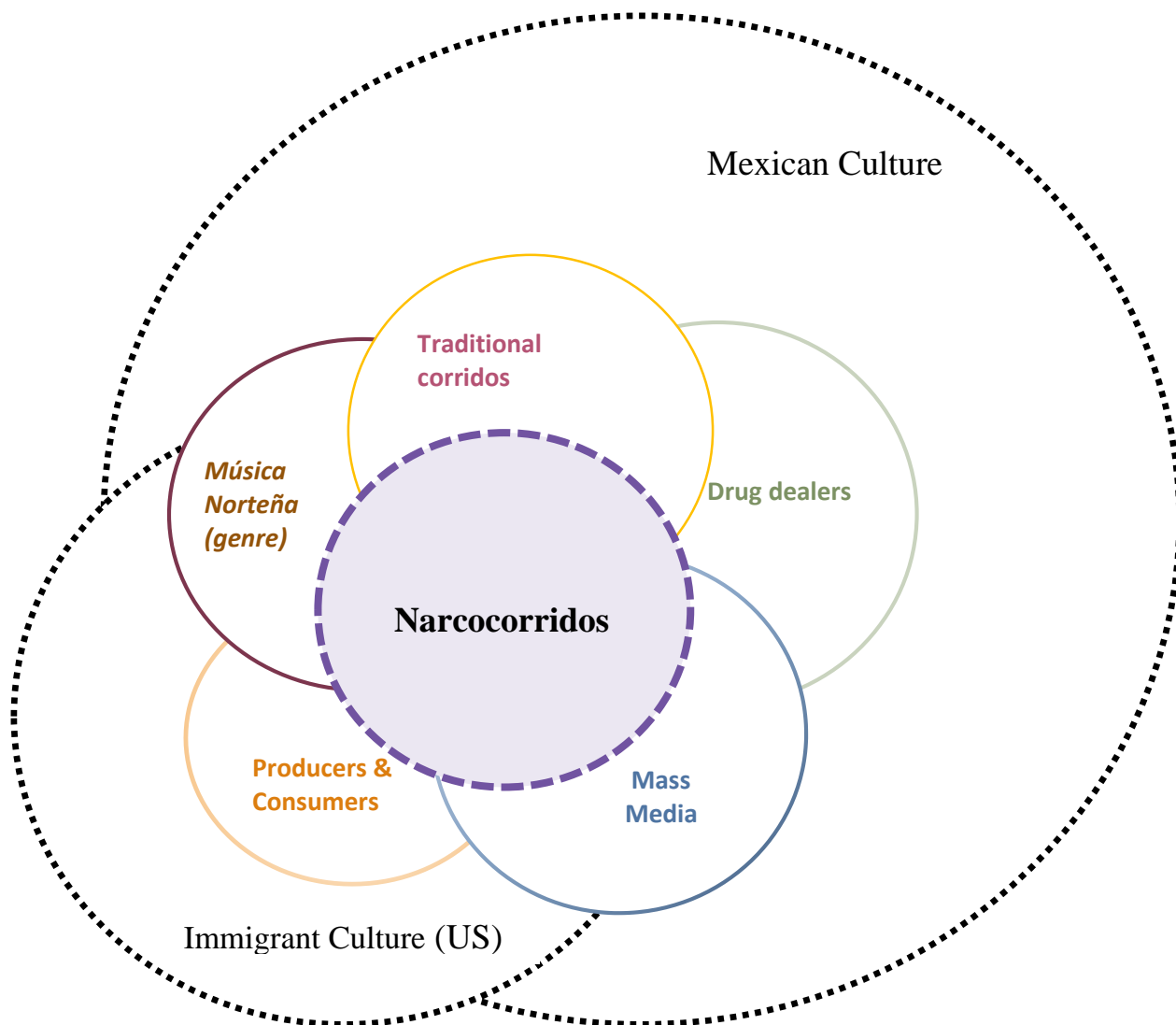
3.7 Narcocorrido's semiosphere

Going back to the model 3, we have that the narcocorridos cannot be located (at least not completely) at the periphery, in the sense that their meanings have a direct resonance with other forms at the center of the Mexican culture, like the news. Besides the commercial songs can work as a key component for the generalized representations of drug traffic and the drug dealers' lifestyle in the region.

Narcoculture in the following visual representation (3.1) is located at the meeting point (not necessarily the periphery) of the different semiospheres (the Mexican and the US immigrant culture) and also at the intersection of some of the elements that constitute the phenomenon. The elements (Producers and consumers, mass media, traditional corridos etc.) on their own share other types of connections so they are not located uniquely inside of the narcocorrido's sphere.

The immigrant culture refers almost particularly to that of the Mexican immigrants in the United States (who are consumers and producers as it has been shown in previous examples) but it can include any other nationality that finds forms of identification with these expressions.

The cultures —Mexican and American, are not represented in their totality but just as significant elements among the others. Finally the semiosphere of the narcocorridos cannot be limited to these cultures or formed uniquely by these elements, these are just the ones analyzed in this work.



CONCLUSIONS

Overview

The thesis was focused on the applicability of the theoretical terms of *subculture*, *mass culture* and *semiosphere* to the analysis of Mexican narcoculture. The work delimited narcoculture as those expressions dedicated to describe and construct representations about the drug dealers' lifestyles. Those expressions were divided in broadly two sets: the expressions dedicated to the depiction of the lifestyle with no explicit participation of the drug dealers in them (movies, songs, novels, and soap operas); and the activities labeled as *narco* that have the active participation of the drug dealers in them and that do not count as acts of violence orchestrated by the cartels (the religious cult to Jesús Malverde and the architectural design of mausoleums). The work first used the theoretical terms (subculture, mass culture and semiosphere) to frame narcoculture as a whole, and then focused particularly on the narcocorridos for the empirical analysis.

Chapter 1 served to specify the terms of *sociosemiotics*, *culture*, *counter-culture* and *anticulture*, the introduction of such terms aided to further frame the main analysis. A brief description and the contextualization of narcoculture's expressions was given in this chapter as well.

Chapter 2 and **3** were structured to answer the research questions, so by listing their answers here, we would be listing the main achievements of those two chapters.

(1) *How can the chosen expressions of narcoculture be related to the concept of subculture?* The first subchapter of Chapter 2 was dedicated to answering this question, first by analyzing the term subculture, and second by using Hebdige's (2007) *spectacular subculture* as reference for the type of subculture the expressions of narcoculture fit in. The reason for choosing *spectacular subcultures* as the base model was that spectacular subcultures are closely linked to the products of mass culture and

that they are centered in the transformation of cultural objects for the generation of a subcultural style, a fact that goes hand and hand with the expressions of narcoculture.

(2) *How can we trace the insertion of the expressions of narcoculture inside mass culture?* The second subchapter of Chapter 2, expanded on the insertion of subcultural elements into the market. For that it used Gottdiener's (1985) semiotic analysis of mass culture and the concept of *transmedial worlds* implemented by Klastrup and Tosca (2004), applying both of them to the mapping of narcoculture.

(3) *How can the concept of semiosphere improve the understanding of the interaction between subculture and mass culture, for the particular case of narcoculture?* The final part of Chapter 2 was dedicated to answer this third question. The semiosphere was used as the space where the previous elements could interact in a dialogue that is not limited to the market or the subcultural appropriations but one that is more complex, and has more levels of differentiation (boundaries), related to territory and identification.

(4) *How can the previous interaction be applied to particular expressions of narcoculture?* Chapter 3 answers this last question by analyzing the narcocorridos, locating them in their context of production and consumption: putting them in parallel to the news to show how the meanings of the expressions can be linked to a dialogue between both. This chapter corroborated the earlier claim that the narcocorridos have a complex web of elements working in the construction of their meanings, and that mass culture and the subcultural elements are working very close together in the production of representations and cultural identities.

The following section will present the most relevant results that emerged from the process of the previous procedures.

Key answers

First on matters of narcoculture's representations and cultural identity, there are at least two possibilities (based broadly on the *modes of incorporation* of Hebdige (2007)), which were evidenced by this work in **Chapter 3**. The first possibility is *what* the representations do in terms of identification—not only in terms of identification to their *exact content*, but to the things, places or people, the content can help to *evoke* (including the yearning for one's own roots, for the case of immigrants living in the United States). The second possibility is what the representations can do in terms of

differentiation (the other side of identification, *that what you are not*). Here the representations of the drug dealers serve to underline the difference between drug dealers (*them*) and the non-drug dealers (*us*).

Regarding the advantages of using the term of *semiosphere*, the work showed that since the subcultural and the mass culture elements are not fixed, it is useful to see the panorama as a continuous dialogue where there is room for the intersection of different-level boundaries. This was helpful when analyzing the narcocorridos because the distinctions between the commercial and the custom made songs are not completely demarcated. Even more, the semiosphere helps to trace the emergence of new meanings coming from the songs. For example, the fact that “El Chapo” is an outlaw is not denied, but rather re-contextualized as a reason for pride, hence acquiring new meaning inside the popular culture. This process of re-contextualization of the songs can also be taken back to the semiotic space and the processes of innovation mentioned by Lotman —where innovation in the semiosphere comes from the translation of meanings from one sphere to another (Lotman 2009:136).

Finally, narcoculture can be seen as the mediation of the drug traffic scenario between Mexico and the United States offered by popular culture, however it is important to notice that this scenario is invariably mediated by other means such as the news or the Government. Because of this, it is difficult if not impossible to talk about a primary mediation. Narcoculture describes the drug situation of Mexico, and it does it in a specific manner, however it is important not to see narcoculture as a framework in opposition, but rather one in interaction with other symbolic frames. A framework in which the signs presented in the social world are the result of the conglomeration of different discourses.

Lastly, the dominant culture of the region is closer to reaching the fourth dimension of *culture* offered by Eco (1994) (reviewed in **Chapter 1**). By questioning itself in relation to the spectrum of meanings emerging from the drug traffic, which include the representations of the drug dealers perpetuated by narcoculture’s expressions.

Further perspectives

This study hints at many problematics that could not be answered within the length or the reach of this study. However those queries could serve as starting points

for other studies inside this, or other disciplines. For example, both forms of identification generated by narcoculture's expressions could have larger consequences and it will be important to go over those if we want to have a clearer idea of what the phenomenon implies. What happens with the representations of narcoculture in the United States? Can the mythic figure of the drug dealer serve to mark 'what our roots are' for the immigrants living in the United States? How are the representations of the drug dealers sustained on both sides of the border?

One element that could be further studied for example is the myth of the *social bandit*, which according to Hobsbawm (1981) has appeared in several cultures at different times in history. This myth would not be without a base in the case of the drug lords, who used to offer favors to the community where they lived in exchange for secrecy. There are many stories in the popular culture about drug lords that came to occupy the empty space left by the Government in remote towns. Then it would make sense for people to create paternalistic representations of them that could later be translated to the popular knowledge, so it will be useful to study the reach and origin of this and other representations.

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“Mehhiko narkokultuuri sotsiosemiootika: subkultuuridest massikultuuri ja semiosfäärini”

Kokkuvõte

Käesolev töö on sotsiosemiotiline uurimus Mehhiko *narkokultuurist* - Mehhiko ja USA vahelise narkokaubanduse tingimustes ilmnevast narkoparunite elustiili kujutamistest. Töö keskendub narkokultuuri väljenduste analüüsile seoses *subkultuuri*, *massikultuuri* ja *semiosfääri* kontseptsioonidega. Mehhiko narkokultuurist rääkides on arvesse võetud kultuurielemente, mis on pühendatud narkokaubitsejate *elustiili* kirjeldamisele, nimetamisele ja konstrueerimisele. Nende väljenduste hulka kuuluvad laulud (*narcocorrido*'d), filmid (*narkofilmid*), raamatud (*narkokirjandus*), seebiooperid, religioonipraktikad ning arhitektuuristiilid (*narkoarhitektuur*). Selle elustiili tähendused ja esitused moodustavad osa regiooni sotsiaalsest kujutlusest ning neid taasluuakse narkokultuuri väljendustega massimeedias.

Need väljendused ja mõiste *narkokultuur* on uurimuses esmalt asetatud subkultuuride ja massikultuuri teooriate vahelisse debatti, mis viib edasi probleemi sidumisele semiosfääri mõistega. Semiosfäär on kohaks, kus saab subkultuuri ja massikultuuri kontseptsioonide dihhotoomiat osaliselt lahendada, kohaks, kus mõlemad aspektid interakteeruvad tähendusloomes. Töö teine osa on pühendatud ühe väljenduse, *narcocorrido* (määratletud laulusõnade keskse teema, narkokaubanduse kaudu) analüüsile eesmärgiga selgitada välja, kuidas eelnevalt käsitletud mõisteid saab rakendada konkreetse väljenduse analüüsiks. Ühtlasi on täpsemalt vaadeldud lauludes ja nende kontekstis ilmnevaid subkultuurilisi ning massikultuurilise tootmise aspekte.

Uurimuse tulemusena on selgitatud, kuidas narkokultuurilised väljendused, iseäranis analüüsitud juhtumid, on tihedalt seotud mitmesuguse sotsiaalse ja kultuurilise dünaamikaga piirkonna narkokaubanduse pikas ja keerulises ajaloos. Seetõttu ei saa narkokultuuri uurimine piirduda nähtuse subkultuuriliste ega massikultuurilise tootmise aspektidega. Pigem nõuab analüüs oluliselt avaramat vaade, mis laseb ilmned a nende elementide dialoogilisel koostoimel ja mitte üksnes vastandumisel. Enamgi veel, taoline vaade võiks anda võimaluse uurimaks edasi, *mida*

narkokaubitsejate kujutamine tähendab laiemas plaanis – diskursusena, mis oma sotsiaalset konteksti levitab, edastab ja muudab.

ANNEXES

Pictures of cemeteries

Ordinary cemetery in Mexico during the celebration of the Day of the Death



Cemetery of 'Jardines del Humaya'



Songs

***El Rey de la Sierra* por Fabián Ortega “El halcón de la Sierra” 1**

Una envidiable capacidad
de tener tanta gente al mando
¿Cómo le hace? ¿Cómo le hará?
pa’ que sigan trabajando
ha de ser por el señor
también empezó de abajo.

Fue buscando y encontró
como llegar a la cima
y jamás se imaginaba
lo tanto que subiría
lo respeta todo el mundo
por su gran sabiduría.

Ya conocen al señor
se imaginan de quien hablo
aquel que vive en la sierra
del Chapo yo estoy hablando.
Le dedico este corrido
este que están escuchando.

El la mafia y en carteles
siempre tienen sus acuerdos
aunque existan diferencias
igual pasa en el gobierno,
no me saquen canas verdes
porque si no me los truena.

Sinaloa, punto clave
pa’ crianza de valientes
han salido los mejores
a ver quién me lo desmiente
a la cuenta de mafiosos
Sinaloa está presente.

Tengo los mejores grupos
aunque yo viva en la sierra,
y tengo mis talibanes
graduados en alta escuela
quién ha dicho que estoy *chapo*
si tengo mucha grandeza.

***The King of the Mountains* by Fabián Ortega “The Hawk of the Mountains”**

An enviable capability
to have so many people under command
How he does it? How can he do it?
to keep them working
maybe it is because the sir
also began from the bottom.

He was looking and he found,
how to get to the top
and he never imagined
how up he would go,
everyone respects him
because of his great wisdom.

You all know the sir
you all can imagine of whom I am talking
the one who lives in the mountains,
of the *Chapo*, I am talking about.
I dedicate him this *corrido* (ballad)
this one you are now listening.

In the mafia and in the cartels
they always have their agreements
although there are differences,
same happens in the government.
“Do not make me upset
because I will break you”.

Sinaloa is a key point
for the brave upbringing
it has produced the best
nobody can deny it
in the share of gangsters,
Sinaloa is always present.

I have the best groups
although I live in the mountains,
and I have my Taliban²,
graduated from the best schools
Who said I'm *chapo*³?
when I have so much greatness.

***El Señor la Montaña por
Los Canelos de Durango***

Joaquín Loera lo es y será
prófugo de la justicia
el Señor de la montaña
también jefe en la ciudad

Amigo del buen amigo
enemigo de enemigos
alegre y enamorado
así es Loera, lo es y será.

Por eso el azul del cielo
desde lejos lo protege
aunque haga frío o calor,
Culiacán es caluroso
mayo es el más peligroso
hay protección y atención

lo respaldada un coronel
no es militar por su grado
su padre se lo ha heredado,
a mi amigo el coronel
capitanes generales
no han podido retirarlo

Hay guachitos y hay tenientes
chinos, también talibanes
y un chinacate que cuida,
Mochomos limpian caminos
por donde Joaquín transita
Colombia y México admiran.

Saludo a los capitanes
que de noche y de día vuelan
de ciudades a la sierra,
y de la sierra a fronteras
en especial al *capirruri*
que ha traspasado fronteras

Será mancha o será raya
lo que el tigre trae pintada
total que ya está marcada
pero es fiera y en la sierra
y también allá en la selva
protege y si quiere atrapa.

***The Lord of the Mountain by
Los Canelos de Durango***

Joaquín Loera is and will be
fugitive from justice
The Lord of the mountain
also the boss of the town.

Friends' friend,
Enemy's enemy,
happy and in love,
that is how Loera is and will be.

That is why the blue sky
protects him from afar
even if it is cold or hot,
Culiacan⁴ is hot
May is the most dangerous,
there is protection and attention.

He is backed up by a Colonel
he is not a soldier by degree
his father inherited him,
to my friend the Colonel,
Captains general
haven't been retire him.

There are *guachitos*⁵ and there are
lieutenants,
Chinese and also Taliban,
a *chinacate*⁶ that watches over,
*Mochomos*⁷ clean the roads
where Joaquín transits,
Colombia and Mexico admire.

I greet the captains
that fly night and day
from cities to mountains,
and from mountains to borders
especially to the *capirruri*⁸
that has crossed borders.

Is it a spot or a stripe?
what the Tiger has painted on,
doesn't matter it is already marked
he is fierce and in the mountains
and also in the jungle
he protects, and if he wants catches.

***El Chapo Guzmán* por José Eulogio
Hernández
"El Potro de Sinaloa"**

De los pies a la cabeza
es bajito de estatura,
de la cabeza hasta el cielo
yo le calculo su altura,
porque es grande entre los grandes
a ver quién tiene una duda.

Ya conoció la pobreza,
ya conoció la riqueza,
si lo respetan respeta,
si lo ofenden se acelera,
y del infierno se escapa,
y se persigna en la iglesia.

A veces la residencias,
a veces casa campaña,
los radios y las metralas,
durmiendo en piso, en la cama,
de techo a veces las cuevas,
Joaquín El Chapo le llaman
Acostumbrado a mandar
también te sabe escuchar,
sobresalió entre los grandes
chequen su historia nomás,
echó raíz en el amor,
hay muchos hijos por ahí.

Por medio de este corrido
voy a mandar saludar,
aquellos viejos amigos
que no he podido olvidar,
soy El tío pa' mis sobrinos
para otros, Chapo Guzmán.

***El Chapo Guzmán* by José Eulogio
Hernández
"The Colt of Sinaloa"**

From head to toe
he is of short stature,
from head to the sky
is how I measure his height,
because he is great among the greats
find someone to doubt it.

He experienced poverty,
he experienced wealth,
if he gets respected, he respects,
if he gets offended, he loses his temper
and from hell he escapes,
and crosses himself in the church.

Sometimes in great residences,
sometimes in camping tents,
radios and machine guns,
sleeping on the floor, or on the bed,
Ceiling caves sometimes;
Joaquín El Chapo they call him.

Used to give orders,
he also knows how to listen to you,
stood out among the great
just check his story,
he put down roots in love
there is lot of offspring out there.

Through this *corrido*
I will send my greetings
to those old friends
I have not been able to forget,
I'm the Uncle for my nephews
for others, Chapo Guzman.

Annexes' notes

¹ The lyrics were transcribed from the recordings of the songs and their translation from Spanish was made by the author of this thesis.

² The term *talibanes* in Spanish (Taliban in English, from the singular Talib) is commonly used in the narcoculture context closely related to its meaning in Arabic "students", in this case lower rank drug dealers. However it can also make reference to Iván Velázquez Caballero alias "El Talibán" who was head a criminal cartel named "Los Zetas".

³ "Chapo" is a slang word used to refer to someone short of height, Joaquín Guzmán Loera gets his nickname from this word.

⁴ Capital of the Mexican State of Sinaloa.

⁵ Diminutive plural of *Guacho*, which is a derogatory name given to a private (the lowest military rank)

⁶ This might make reference to Enoc Martínez Zepeda whose alias is "El Chinacate", Enoc Martínez is allegedly the cousin of "El Chapo". The word *chinacate* comes from *náhuatl* and means bat or chicken without feathers.

⁷ *Mochomos* is how some desert ants are called in the Mexican state of Sinaloa, here it could be making reference to Alfredo Beltrán Leyva head of a drug cartel of Sinaloa. Alfredo Beltrán alias "El Mochomo" and his brothers are believed to work closely with Joaquín Guzmán.

⁸The official lyrics of the songs are not available on the internet, and the meaning of this word or its reference could not be found.

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